

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., MODERN-DAY PROPHET:
AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF KING'S PREACHING

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ABSTRACT

Martin Luther King, Jr., Modern-Day Prophet:

An Ethical Analysis of King's Preaching

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There is in mainline, Protestant America a superficial understanding of prophecy as foretelling and criticizing. The need is to recapture the biblical understanding of prophesy.

The biblical prophets reminded the faith community of its tradition and identity. They were called by God into a relationship with God that transcended their own community. They were called to preach the divine word. They were charged with the responsibility of holding together criticizing and energizing. They demythologized the established religious beliefs, ideas, customs and institutions; and they brought the world into divine focus by pronouncing the judgment and hope of God. It is biblical prophecy that provides the paradigm for modern prophecy.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood prophesy in its biblical sense. While much has been written about him, King scholarship has failed to capture the universal dimension of his character. This work captures this universal dimension of his character by setting forth the biblical prophetic tradition as his model for ministry. King (like the biblical prophets) was a radical monotheist. He believed that all peoples were children of the

one God.

This work illustrates how such a ministerial model was operative within King's contemporary context. It analyzes the consequences of radical monotheism for right action and illustrates how such thought found indigenous expression through black preaching. Lastly, this work provides a universal model for ministry by seeing King, the prophet, as theologian.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Much has been written about the life, times and thought of Martin Luther King Jr. Within the dialogue on King scholarship there is, as David Garrow suggests, "a multi-party tug of war," with scholars seeking to claim King for different ideologies.¹ Some seek to claim him for Walter Rauschenbush's social gospel, some seek to claim him for Boston's personalism, others for Mohandas K. Gandhi's satyagrahic non-violence, still others for Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism,² and still others for the Black Christian Tradition.

While acknowledging that all of these elements are essential for an accurate understanding of King, at the most rudimentary level, King's model for ministry was based on the biblical prophetic tradition. King took his Judeo-Christian heritage seriously and sought to live out its vision in his contemporary context.

This project provides a proper understanding of King by setting forth the biblical prophetic tradition as his model

1 David J. Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," Union Seminary Quarterly Review 40, no. 4 (1986):5.

2 Garrow, 5.

for ministry. That perspective is important for the life of the church in that it offers a universal model for ministry. Further, the project illustrates how such a model can be operative within a specific socio-historical context.

Thesis

The thesis of this project is that a proper understanding of King is obtained only by seeing him as a biblical prophetic monotheist. It is precisely the idea of a personalized righteous God, who is actively involved in human history, that provides the foundation for King's invincible hope.

Definition of Major Terms

The following terms are defined as they relate to this project:

Biblical Prophetic Tradition

This is the tradition of God's emissaries to the heads of government and the people of God in Judeo-Christian history who kept alive their heritage and identity.³

Black Christian Tradition

This is the set of shared values of the black American experience (emanating from a perspective of the oppressed) that finds significant expression in various communal sym-

3 Bruce C. Birch, What Does the Lord Require? The Old Testament Call to Social Witness (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 67. Use of the term has been expanded in this project to include the prophets of both testaments.

bolds, ideas, rituals, and pronouncements. These values are grounded in the Judeo-Christian understanding of human society and based on the biblical doctrine of the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples.⁴

Beloved Community

This phrase refers to a community of love and justice wherein brotherhood is an actuality in all of social life.⁵ It is the ideal corporate expression of the Christian faith: a transformed and regenerated human society.⁶

Gospel

This term refers to the good news of the creative, blessing and saving work of God as revealed in both the First and Second Testaments.

Satyagraha

This is the effort to improve social conditions through the use of truth-force (nonviolent resistance) instead of physical force (violence).⁷

Personalism

A school of thought which believes that personality is

4 Peter J. Paris, The Social Teaching of the Black Churches (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 1-10.

5 Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1974), 120-125.

6 Smith and Zepp, 120-125.

7 Smith and Zepp, 49.

the key to reality. It holds that conscious personality is both the supreme value and the supreme reality in the universe. It is the metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God.⁸

Placement of Thesis In the Scholarly Dialogue

There is a vast collection of literature on Martin Luther King, Jr. The author has chosen to limit this discussion to that literature which focuses on his biblical prophetic influence, his ethical thought, his preaching, and his theology.

The idea of King as a prophet is not new. One of the first to recognize him as such was Abraham Joshua Heschel. In introducing King to the Sixty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Rabbinical Assembly on March 25, 1968, he said:

Where in America today do we hear a voice like the prophets of Israel? Martin Luther King is a sign that God has not forsaken the United States Of America. God has sent him to us. His presence is the hope of America. His mission is sacred, his leadership of supreme importance to every one of us.⁹

Among those who later recognized King as a prophet were Gilbert H. Caldwell and James Melvin Washington. Caldwell writes in the Christian Century:

Martin Luther King, Jr., was a product of the southern black experience: son of a Baptist preacher, graduate of Morehouse College, holder

⁸ Kenneth Smith & Ira Zepp, 100.

⁹ "Conversation with Martin Luther King," Conservative Judaism 22, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 1.

of a Ph.D. degree in systematic theology, black preacher, prophet in word and deed.¹⁰

James Melvin Washington, in his work entitled A Testament of Hope, calls King the "prophet of the people."¹¹

Those of us [says Washington] who were both King's contemporaries and his sympathizers believed that some strange providence guided the course of his life. Many of us came to believe that Dr. King's leadership embodied the Zeitgeist, the spirit of the times,... We wanted to believe that God was on our side, and we believed that King's life, and the movement he led, constitutes a powerful "testament of hope."¹²

According to Washington, it was the black preachers who managed to create and sustain the only consistent tradition of prophetic ministry in America.¹³ King, says Washington, was a product of this company of prophets, and he accepted his "call" to be a part of this ministry even before he finished college.¹⁴

William M. Ramsay also sees King as a modern day prophet. If a prophet, he says, is simply one who speaks

10. Gilbert H. Caldwell, "Dreamers, Visionaries and Prophets," Christian Century 93 (Mar. 31, 1976): 308.

11. James Melvin Washington, A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), xvi.

12. Washington, xvi.

13. Washington, xvii.

14. Washington, xvii.

for God, then there are many prophets, with King being one of them.¹⁵ It is the message of the canonical prophets, says Ramsay, which helps us in identifying modern prophets.¹⁶ These prophets give us a model for prophecy.¹⁷

This work seeks to further the dialogue in King scholarship by seeing King as a biblical prophetic monotheist and also viewing the prophetic tradition as the model on which his ministry was based. It further seeks to illustrate how such a model found expression in a contemporary context.

An essential work in analyzing King's ethical thought is Smith and Zepp's, Search for the Beloved Community. In that study the authors suggest the major intellectual traditions upon which King drew.

Martin Luther King's theology and ethics did not develop "from scratch" or in a vacuum. They had very definite historical and intellectual sources; chief among these were Protestant liberalism and the philosophy of personalism. The liberalizing process began at Morehouse College with George Kelsey's Bible course and Benjamin May's preaching, waxed strong at Crozer Seminary under the liberalism of George W. Davis, and matured at Boston with the personalism of Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf.¹⁸

15 William M. Ramsay, Four Modern Prophets (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 3.

16 Ramsay, 2.

17 Ramsay, 2.

18 Smith and Zepp, 12.

King was further influenced according, to Smith and Zepp, by the scholarship of Walter Rauschenbusch, the life and works of Gandhi, and by Reinhold Niebuhr.¹⁹ However, for Smith and Zepp it is King's vision of the "Beloved Community" which is the organizing principle of all his thought and activity.²⁰

Garrow agrees in part with Smith and Zepp as he says that they "give a fair and balanced, if at times incomplete, portrayal of the major intellectual traditions upon which Martin King drew."²¹

They rightly suggest that it was King's three years at Crozer Theological Seminary (1948-51) much more so than either his undergraduate experience at Morehouse College (1944-1948) or his graduate years at Boston University School of Theology (1951-1954), that witnessed King's academic maturation and the development of a first rate intellectual curiosity and self testing. Nonetheless,... Zepp and Smith do not adequately appreciate how King's evaluation and partial adoptions of different intellectual doctrines were profoundly rooted in his social presupposition and faith experience. These presuppositions and experiences were themselves the product of King's upbringing in a family and a church that inculcated the biblical stories especially for this son and grandson of preachers and that fully represented the strong heritage of the black southern Baptist church.²²

19 Smith and Zepp, 14-31.

20 Smith and Zepp, 119.

21 Garrow, 6.

22 Garrow, 6.

This work seeks to advance the dialogue concerning King's ethical thought in two respects. The first is to suggest the biblical prophetic tradition as a source of his ethical thought; and the second is to analyze King's integration or partial adoption (as alluded by Garrow) of his intellectual sources. A trajectory of the thesis as it is applicable to this area of the work would: (1) view the biblical prophetic tradition as the fundamental basis of King's ethic (which also seeks to historicize the idea of the "Beloved Community"); (2) examine the intellectual sources previously identified as the tools that King used to formulate his ethical thought; and (3) affirm the Black Christian Tradition as the faith context out of which such an ethic was operative.

King, says William E. Coleman, made the connections between religion, politics, and rhetoric just as the prophets of ancient Israel had done some twenty-five hundred years prior.²³ They realized that any society is basically political in nature.²⁴ The function of their rhetoric as was King's, according to Coleman, was primarily one of confronting injustice so that justice could triumph.²⁵ Coleman

²³ William E. Coleman, "Religion, Protest, and Rhetoric," Foundations 16 (Jan.-Mar. 1973): 41-42.

²⁴ Coleman, 41.

²⁵ Coleman, 49.

further contends that there are several themes that are common to the rhetoric of religious protest. The first is an emphasis on justice, the second is a suffering for justice and love, and the third is a constant appeal to a "higher law."²⁶

Marcus H. Boulware is of the opinion that, while King was studying theology, he also learned the teachings of ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians concerning forensic oratory.²⁷ He learned, according to Boulware:

that for a speech to contain beauty and dignity of composition, there were three things necessary: first, it must please; second, it must convince; and third, it must persuade. For the first effect, the orator must speak gracefully; for the second, he must talk plainly; and for the third, he must express himself with great ardor and fervency.²⁸

This work seeks to advance the dialogue regarding King's articulation of his ethical thought through preaching. More specifically, it seeks to illustrate that King's preaching contained an authentic quality which was essentially black.

If theology is an essentially intellectual, critical

²⁶ Coleman, 49-51.

²⁷ Marcus H. Boulware, The Oratory of Negro Leaders: 1900-1968 (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 248.

²⁸ Boulware, 248.

and analytical discipline, write Edmonson and Logan, then it becomes difficult to consider King as a theologian in the traditional sense.²⁹ According to the traditional understanding of theology, the discipline is only indirectly and abstractly related to particular human contexts.³⁰ Edmonson and Logan further write that:

King's theology represents a move away from abstract speculation toward contextual application. What King was concerned with was not the articulation of the "truth" of Christian humanity in general terms, but the bringing into reality of that humanizing possibility. His concern tended to move him away from indepth analysis to application of what he felt were the self-evident principles of the faith.³¹

Still further, they write:

The ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the embodiment of theological contemplation and nonviolent direct action as a Christian method to achieve social change. Dr. King, in order to be understood or classified as a theologian, must first be seen as a minister of the Gospel. He established a new starting point for theology. Unlike traditional theologians who used the God/Man questioning as a starting point, King began with the human plight of the oppressed, the poor.³²

Not only was King a theologian, but he was a Black

29 Lonnie Edmonson and Archie Logan, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Theology in Context," Duke Divinity School Review 40 (Spring 1975): 126.

30 Edmonson and Logan, 126.

31 Edmonson and Logan, 127.

32 Edmonson and Logan, 132.

theologian. He was, says Paul Garber, a Black theologian whose God-talk focused on the theme of liberation.³³ The basic content of Black theology according to Garber, is the notion of liberation and the understanding of Jesus as liberator.³⁴ These basic elements of Black theology were embodied in the life and message of Martin Luther King, Jr.³⁵ This work seeks to advance the dialogue concerning King's theology by proposing it as a paradigm for the preacher as theologian.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this project is limited to the influence of the biblical prophetic tradition upon King's ministry, an examination of the intellectual sources of his ethical thought, and the articulation of his thought through preaching.

The project encompasses the identification of the sources of King's thought, an analysis of King's integration of these sources, and an examination of King's use of preaching for the articulation of his thought. Finally, King is offered as a contemporary model of the preacher as theologian.

33 Paul R. Garber, "King Was a Black Theologian," Journal of Religious Thought 31, no. 21 (Fall-Winter 1974-75): 16.

34 Garber, 23.

35 Garber, 23.

Methodology

This study integrates the theological discipline of Christian ethics and the functional discipline of preaching. According to David Garrow,

....much of the existing scholarship on King is of little serious, long-term value because of its over-reliance on the least dependable King texts (King's publications) coupled with a limited usage of the more dependable text (unpublished sermons, speeches, etc....). dependable analysis of King's thinking must be based on a wide-ranging usage of King's unpublished sermons and speeches than on his published works (which were heavily edited and sometimes ghost written).³⁶

This project seeks to analyze King's integration of his intellectual sources and examine his preaching for the articulation of his thought by usage of his unpublished sermons. Chapter 2 establishes the biblical prophetic tradition as King's model for ministry and illustrates how that model found authentic expression within the Black Christian Tradition. Chapter 3 establishes prophetic radical monotheism as the rubric for analyzing King's integration and distinct use of the historical and intellectual sources of his ethical thought. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of King's use of preaching (specifically Black preaching) to articulate his thought, while chapter 5 concludes the project by proposing King as a contemporary model for the prophet as theologian. The appendixes contain sermons by

³⁶ Garrow, 5.

the writer which illustrates the author's understanding of prophecy in its biblical sense.

CHAPTER 2

King's Model for Ministry:

The Biblical Prophetic Tradition

Prophecy is one trend among many in the manticism which was so immensely widespread in the ancient world.' In antiquity, divination was largely pursued against the background of a model of the world and of life which was utterly convincing to contemporaries.² It was Cicero who distinguished the two types of divination employed by religious studies: inductive or instrumental (which interprets omens) and intuitive or mediated (where a human medium passes on some direct divine inspiration).³ Both types are represented on the outskirts of biblical religion.⁴

Characteristics of Biblical Prophecy

The kind of prophet most common in Israel, suggests Klaus Koch, is seen in Ebla in North Syria as early as the twenty-third century B.C.⁵ In the city of Mari, which lay on the Euphrates, on what is now the frontier between Syria

1 Klaus Koch, The Prophets: The Assyrian Period (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 7.

2 Koch, 7.

3 Koch, 7.

4 Koch, 7.

5 Koch, 9.

and Iraq, archaeologists have excavated a royal archive dating from the eighteenth century B.C. The way in which the Mari prophets spoke points forward to the prophecies of the Israelite prophets.⁶

The religion of the Bible is not something which developed on its own, but grew out of the extraordinarily complex religious history of the ancient East. Its roots in this religious history are particularly evident in a phenomenon such as prophecy.⁷

The role of the prophet in biblical times appears to be inextricably woven into the message of the prophet. For what we know about the prophets' lives, occupations, etc., we gather from their messages. Their role, according to Bruce Birch, has been to proclaim God's judgment and hope. For Birch, to be a prophet is to be called by God to speak the divine Word.⁸

Prophets appear in the Bible at the same time as kingship.⁹ Therefore, the implicit suggestion made by Birch is that kingship and nationhood presented threats to the traditions and identity of Israel.

Prophets anointed the kings and held them accountable

6 Koch, 9-10.

7 Koch, 11.

8 Birch, 74.

9 Birch, 74.

to God's will. There developed a royal ideal of the king as defender and champion of the covenant and its God. The covenant-based law code of the Deuteronomist includes a law of the king.¹⁰

....you may indeed set as king over you him whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; ...only he must not multiply horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to multiply horses... and he shall not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply for himself silver and gold. And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law...and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them...he may not turn aside from the commandment...so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.¹¹

The royal ideal is of a king who is not a center of authority unto himself but who derives authority from the covenant law of God. The history of kingship in Israel is, as Birch suggests, a journey away from covenant which begins with Solomon.¹² The role of the prophet implicit in Birch's assessment of Israel's history is that of reminding the faith community of its tradition and identity.¹³

10 Birch, 68.

11 Deuteronomy 17:14-20.

12 Birch, 69.

13 Birch, 70.

The task of prophetic ministry, according to Walter Brueggemann, is to hold together criticizing and energizing.¹⁴ Brueggemann's understanding of prophecy emanates out of the covenantal tradition of Moses. While acknowledging the non-Israelite antecedents (Canaanite and Mari) of prophecy in Israel, Brueggemann sees the tradition itself as unambiguous when it comes to the dominating figure of Moses. In essence, he suggests that the shaping of Israel's prophecy took place from inside its own experience and confession of faith and not through external appropriation from somewhere else.¹⁵

Brueggemann's paradigm for prophecy is Moses, and that paradigm carries a two-dimensional alternative consciousness: a religion of God's freedom as an alternative to the static imperial religion of order and triumph; and a politics of justice and compassion as an alternative to the imperial politics of oppression. This alternative consciousness wrought through Moses is characterized by criticizing and energizing.¹⁶

Criticism, for Brueggemann, is not carping and denouncing. Rather, it is the assertion that false claims to

 14 Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 14.

15 Brueggemann, 15.

16 Brueggemann, 18-19.

authority and power cannot keep their promises in the face of the free God. Real criticism, says Brueggemann, begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right. Legitimate criticism maintains that things are not as they should be, not as they were promised, and not as they must and will be. It is therefore the task of the prophet to bring to public expression the people's hurt in a type of dismantling criticism that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge.¹⁷

Energizing, for Brueggemann, is bringing to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order. We are energized, he submits, not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given.¹⁸

Perhaps the most detailed analysis of the role of the biblical prophet is provided by Abraham Heschel in his work entitled The Prophets.¹⁹ For Heschel this role is multifaceted.

Initially, he sees the prophet as an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs

17 Brueggemann, 20-21.

18 Brueggemann, 23.

19 Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 10.

cherished as certainties, and institutions endowed with supreme sanctity are exposed by the prophet as scandalous pretensions.²⁰ This is seen repeatedly in the prophecy of Jeremiah.

To what purpose does frankincense come to me
from Sheba,
or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt
offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacri-
fices pleasing to Me.²¹

Again in 7:21-23, the prophet speaks against sacrifices and burnt offerings without repentance, and exhorts his people to obey God's voice.²²

I did not speak to your fathers or command them
concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.
But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice,
and I will be your God, and you shall be my
people; and walk in all the way that I command
you, that it may be well with you."²³

The prophet's role as an iconoclast was to demythologize the established religious beliefs, ideas, customs and institutions.

Heschel also sees the prophet as a messenger or spokesperson from God. The prophet's duty, he asserts, is to speak to the people, whether they hear or not. The main vocation of a prophet is "to declare to Jacob his transgres-

20 Heschel, 10.

21 Jeremiah 6:20.

22 Heschel, 11.

23 Jeremiah 7:22b-23.

sion and to Israel his sin" (Mic. 3:8), to let the people know "that it is evil and bitter...to forsake...God" (Jer. 2:19), and to call upon them to return. The task of prophetic thinking, then, is to bring the world into divine focus.²⁴

The prophet, says Heschel, is placed in a relationship transcending his own total community, and even the realm of other nations and kingdoms. The measure of his superiority is that of universality.²⁵ Jeremiah again suffices as an example.

See, I have set you this day over nations
and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to
break down, to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.²⁶

The prophet is commonly characterized as a messenger of God, yet the prophet is more than that. He is a person who: stands in the presence of God (Jer. 15:19); who stands "in the council of the Lord" (Jer. 23:18); is a participant, as it were, in the council of God -- not a bearer of dispatches whose function is limited to being sent on errands. He is a counselor as well as a messenger.²⁷

24 Heschel, 24.

25 Heschel, 21.

26 Jeremiah 1:10.

27 Heschel, 21.

Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets.²⁸

Lastly, for Heschel, the prophet is an associate of God. He is not just a mouthpiece but a person; he is not just an instrument but a partner, an associate of God. The task of the prophet is to convey the word of God, yet the word is aglow with pathos.²⁹ Prophetic utterances show that the fundamental experience of the prophet is: a fellowship with the feelings of God; a sympathy with the divine pathos; and a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet's reflection of, or participation in, the divine pathos.³⁰ It is this pathos that the prophet seeks to convey in his message.

The message of the prophet is, as Hans Walter Wolff suggests, an "irresistible word."³¹ As Amos purports, the word of Yahweh came upon him even though he had not sought it (3:3-8). He saw himself exposed to Yahweh's utterance, unwillingly but also inescapably. It was a new word of Yahweh which overpowered him.³² The prophet's feeling of being

28 Amos 3:7.

29 Heschel, 25-26.

30 Heschel, 26.

31 Hans Walter Wolff, Confrontations with Prophets (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 11.

32 Wolff, 11.

compelled by a stronger will than his own is further suggested in Jeremiah.

Thou didst deceive me, and I let myself
be deceived;
Thou was too strong for me, and didst
prevail over me.³³

The prophet's way of speaking is, as a rule, in poetry and is characterized by rhythm and parallelism.³⁴ The form in which a particular message is cast is important because it is never just something external and concerned with literary style alone. In the last resort, it is not separated from content. The choice of the form is primarily determined by the subject matter of the message.³⁵

Prophecy ultimately employed the "messenger formula" as the most direct means of expressing its function. This form ("thus says") which the prophets used more frequently than any other to deliver their messages, provides an understanding of their own conception of their role.³⁶

The predominant content of the pre-exilic prophets' oracles, according to R. B. Y. Scott, is the pronouncement of divine judgment, usually accompanied by an accusation which sets out the reasons for the impending doom of the ac-

33 Jeremiah 20:7.

34 Gerhard von Rad, The Message of the Prophets (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 15.

35 von Rad, 20.

36 von Rad, 19.

cused. The prophets saw that the ethical demands and the consequent judgment of Yahweh rested primarily on Israel herself.³⁷

The basic form of the judgment oracle is well illustrated in Micah 3:9-12:

Summons to the accused -- "Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob!"

The indictment -- "who abhor justice and pervert all equity..."

The connecting link with divine judgment -- "Therefore, because of your..."

The sentence of the judge -- "Zion shall be plowed as a field..."³⁸

The indictment sometimes appears to stand by itself as a prophetic denunciation of wrongdoing, but the consequent judgment is implied or appears nearby in the literary context. The announcement of divine judgment is the basic word to which the various forms of denunciation or reproach are related, directly or by implication.³⁹

The counterpart of the judgment-oracle is the promise or salvation-oracle and this is present in one of at least four forms.⁴⁰ The first is the assurance of the imminent

 37 R. B. Y. Scott, The Relevance of the Prophets (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 108.

38 Scott, 109.

39 Scott, 109.

40 Scott, 110.

overthrow of the nation's enemies (e.g., Isa. 7:3-9; 10:12-19; 37:21-29). The second form, the promise of deliverance, is presented as an alternative to judgment and is conditional on the nation's response (e.g., Isa. 1:19-20; Jer. 21:8-9, 22:2-5). The third type of salvation-oracle exists where the loving mercy of Yahweh overtakes and overthrows his disciplinary judgments (e.g., Hosea 2:16-25, 11:8-9 and 14:5-8). Finally, there are oracles of promise where the prophet, through standing under the present judgment of Yahweh, looks to a day of restoration (e.g., Jer. 29:10, 31:2-6, 20, 31:31-34).⁴¹

The common element in the various oracles, according to Scott, is that each is the expression or formulation of Yahweh's personal and moral will. The prophetic oracles constantly inject into the religious situation the claimant moral demands of any active and interested deity. They contribute to ethical vitality by calling for response and decision, and by relating the present to the future in terms of the historic purpose of Yahweh and his moral government of the world. The content of the prophetic utterance is a communication of the will of Yahweh to a present which cannot be separated from the future. The future is determined by the same will which makes these moral demands in the present, so that the prophet's announcement of the future is

41 Scott, 110-111.

a righteous act of Yahweh's present will.⁴²

The biblical prophets reminded the faith community of its tradition and identity. They were called by God into a relation with God that transcended their own community. They were called to preach the divine word. They were charged with the responsibility of holding together criticizing and energizing. They demythologized the established religious beliefs, ideas, customs and institutions. Finally, they brought the world into divine focus by pronouncing the judgment and hope of God. Having identified the characteristics of biblical prophecy, the task is to determine if King fits the prophetic paradigm.

King As A Modern-Day Prophet

To suggest that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a modern-day prophet is to purport that he was more than simply one of many who spoke a divine word. It is the contention of this writer that the biblical prophetic tradition was the model on which King's ministry was based. It is further submitted that the biblical prophetic tradition was the foundation on which his role and message as a minister rested. A course on the Hebrew prophets was not required at Crozer (as Smith and Zepp have pointed out) and King never took the elective course taught periodically.⁴³ Yet, the

42 Scott, 112.

43 Smith and Zepp, 14.

influence of this tradition is very evident in his sermons.⁴⁴ It is the canonical prophets, as Ramsay suggests, that provide us with a contemporary paradigm for prophecy.

The role of the prophet (according to Birch) was to remind the community of faith of its tradition and identity. It was a reminder of their torah story and of what God had done on their behalf in history. It was a reminder of their covenantal relation with their God. Whenever the faith community failed to do what the Lord required (Micah 6:8), the prophet appealed to their conscious by calling to their remembrance the covenant and the torah.

Does America have a torah story? King apparently thought so. He constantly appealed to the nation's conscious by reminding it of its Constitution and Declaration of Independence (America's Torah). The most explicit example of this is seen in his sermon entitled "Why I am Op-

 44 This writer contends that the influence of the biblical prophetic tradition on King's thought was fostered by his association with Abraham Joshua Heschel who was a good friend, a staunch supporter of the Civil Rights Movement, and one of the foremost authorities on the Hebrew prophets. Heschel's book entitled The Prophets was published in 1962. It was not possible for this writer to gain access to King's personal library (located in the King residence) to determine whether that book or any others on this subject was a part of his library. However, Lynn Cothren, Coretta Scott King's personal assistant, informed this writer that King also had access to SCLC and Ebenezer Baptist Church libraries. (Lynn Cothren, Telephone interview, October 1987.)

posed to the War in Vietnam." In it, he likens America to the prodigal son who has gone astray.

This is an analogy of America today... America has strayed to the far country of racism and militarism. The home that all too many Americans left was solidly structured idealistically. It's pillars were soundly grounded in the insights of our Judeo - Christian heritage. All men are made in the image of God, all men are brothers... All men are created equal.... every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. Every man has rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state... they are God given... out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth. What a marvelous foundation for any home. What a glorious and healthy place to inhabit. But America strayed away... It is time for all people of conscience to call upon America to come back home. Come home America, from your dark sojourn into the far countries of racism... from your tragic reckless adventure in Vietnam, come home America.⁴⁵

King reminds America again of its torah in his sermon entitled "Lost Sheep." In exploring the concept of lostness he said:

....., a nation can be lost and I venture to say this morning that Western civilization is lost. I venture to say this morning that America is lost. I venture to say that America is lost because she has not remained true to the insights of the Shepherd. Here is a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal. And it is one of the strange ironies of history that in such a nation men are still arguing over whether the color of a man's skin determines the content of

45 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Ga., 30 April 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, 15-16 (hereafter referred to as King Library and Archives).

his character. That's a lost nation."⁴⁶

In each of these examples, King proposes an alternative conscienceness to the community of faith by calling to remembrance its torah and covenantal obligations.

The task of prophetic ministry (Brueggemann) is to hold together criticizing and energizing. Criticizing in the prophetic sense is to bring to public expression the hurt of the people.

King's prophetic criticism is seen most vividly in his sermon entitled "Interruptions," delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church. He said:

We see so many tragic interruptions these days. They have come to transform the buoyancy of hope to the fatigue of despair.... There is something wrong with our world, sick unto death. And the main problem is the interruption of war. We look at our young people, and we wonder what's wrong.... No generation in the history of our nation has had to face what this generation of young people face. This is the first generation in the history of our nation, and probably in the history of the world that has known four wars... World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, and now the war in Vietnam. Four interruptions within a generation. And this is what is wrong. People are confused, angry, frustrated. The President the other night in his State of the union message talked about America. He talked about all of her wealth... and he ended up saying, this is the most prospering nation in the history of the world... and yet, there is a great deal of restlessness... a great deal of questioning. And the President didn't seem to understand why; this restlessness. And oh I wish that I could answer him this morning by saying there have been too many

46 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Lost Sheep," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 18 September 1966, King Library and Archives, 3.

interruptions."⁴⁷

King here is articulating the hurt of the people caused by war. It is a critique of the royal conscience that everything is agreeable. War is not acceptable and everything is not as the royal conscience would have us to believe. Something is wrong and King has broken the royal sense of numbness and voiced that which the people did not voice. This criticism is further seen in his sermon entitled "What a Mother Should Tell Her Child." Here he critiques what he considers to be the three major evils of his day. These evils, says King, are the evils of war, economic injustice and racial injustice.⁴⁸ In discussing each of these, he suggests that there is something wrong, and then suggests what must and will be done.

Tell your child early that there is something wrong with war. Tell them early that war is a dangerous, evil force. Get it over to them at an early age, so long as man moves down this path, he's destined to be plunged into the abyss... war is evil, because it stacks up national debts, higher than mountains of gold.... it sends men home maimed, mutilated.... it fills our nation with widows and orphans.... it leaves so many people physically handicapped and psychologically deranged and we must somehow struggle and work all over this nation to bring an end to the dark and

⁴⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Interruptions," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 21 Jan. 1968, King Library and Archives, 2-3.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "What a Mother Should Tell Her Child," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 12 May 1963, King Library and Archives, 6-7.

desolate night of war.⁴⁹

The critique is against the unjust war perpetrated by the royal conscience of the government. The effects of such a war is both a mental and physical crippling of society. All aspects of communal life are affected. Peace is what must and will exist.

Regarding economic injustice, he said:

Get it over to your child early that war is evil and then get it over that economic injustice is an evil force.... Now I've been over the South; I've walked through the village streets and stopped at the village stores in the Delta of Mississippi, and I've seen black men and women who make less than \$800.00 a year. Then I've lifted my eyes to some of the big industrial areas of the North. I've seen men being degenerated morally, crippled in their souls because of the growing problem of unemployment. Oh, we've got to do something about that.... God has left enough in this world for all his children to have the basic necessities of life. There must be a better distribution of wealth.⁵⁰

King's critique of economic injustice is a systemic one. It attacks capitalism at its core as a system that allows for inequities and injustices. Those who have initiative are rewarded and those who do not are punished. However, the system does not take into account those who have initiative but do not have the opportunity to display it. King brings capitalism into divine focus, suggesting a type of socio-capitalism where everyone has an opportunity

49 King, "What a Mother Should Tell Her Child," 7.

50 King, "Mother," 7-8.

to achieve the necessities of life. He further seems to place the responsibility on those who "have" to care for those who "have not."

Regarding racial injustice, he said:

Then there is the other evil of racial injustice. I don't need to describe the people for you. You see it in all of its ugly dimensions. You've seen it in the crying voice of a little Emmett C. Till, screaming from the rushing waters in Mississippi.... in a terrible, vicious, ugly mob in Oxford, Mississippi.... in an old tired Negro woman shopping all day in a downtown store, and coming to the point of wanting a cup of coffee and a hamburger to keep going, only to be told that we don't serve Niggers here.... Get it over to your child. He must never be content until segregation is removed from every area of this country.⁵¹

For King, this was the nation's greatest problem, perhaps because he saw it as the root of its other problems.

In his sermon entitled "Thou Fool," he said:

Our white brothers must see this [dependence on others]. They haven't seen it up to now. The great problem facing our nation today in the area of race, is that it is the black man who to a large extent produced the wealth of this nation. And the nation doesn't have sense enough to share it's wealth and it's power with the very people who made it so... For more than two centuries, our forebearers labored here without wages... they made cotton king. And with their hands and with their backs and with their labor, they built the sturdy docks... And now this nation is telling us that we can't build. Negroes are excluded almost absolutely from the building trades. It's lilly white. Why? Because these jobs pay six, seven, eight, nine and ten dollars an hour. And they don't want Negroes to have it.⁵²

51 King, "Mother," 9.

52 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Thou Fool," Sermon preached at Mount Pisgah Baptist Church, Chicago, 27 August 1967, King Library and Archives, 8.

Still further, in his sermon entitled "Love and Forgiveness," he said:

Think of the fact in our own nation that there are some ten million families that are considered families in chronic poverty-stricken conditions. These families have from three to four members, so there are between thirty and forty million people in our nation who are literally poverty-stricken.... And there are individuals who feel that nothing can be done about this... In fact there is a man seeking to be nominated President of the United States on the Republican ticket who said just recently that those who are poverty-stricken are that way because they don't have initiative... And somehow he sincerely feels this is the case. He does not realize that many people are poverty-stricken because of the long night of discrimination. He does not realize that there is a force called automation scrapping 40,000 jobs a week and that many people are displaced because of this force and because of discrimination.⁵³

The prophet must not only criticize but energize as well. The prophet must hold the two together. For criticizing, devoid of energizing, is nothing more than carping and denouncing (Brueggemann). Energizing in the prophetic sense is bringing to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the royal conscience. It is that which is promised but not yet fulfilled. It is an acknowledgment of God as a faithful promiser who is actively involved in human affairs, fulfilling those promises. King was not overwhelmed by the evils of his day because he

53 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love and Forgiveness," Sermon preached at the American Baptist Convention, Atlantic City, 5 May 1964, King Library and Archives, 8-9 .

believed that, with God, those evils could and would be overcome.

Initially we find evidence for such a claim in the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement, "We Shall Overcome." It was an adaptation of the spiritual "I Shall Overcome," voicing the invincible hope of the movement. Evidence for this claim can be seen again in some of King's favorite excerpts from the poetry of Thomas Carlyle ("no lie can live forever") William Cullen Bryant ("Truth crushed to earth will rise again"), and James Russell Lowell:

Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on
the throne.... yet that scaffold sways the future.
And behind the dim unknown standeth God within the
shadow keeping watch above his own.⁵⁴

Additional evidence substantiating this claim can be found in his sermons.

In King's sermon entitled "But, If Not," he said:

...these men [Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego] never doubted God, and his power, as they did what they did [refused to bow to the King's god]... they made it very clear that they knew that God had the power to spare them. They said that to the King. Now we know that the God that we worship is able to deliver us. And that grew out of their experience. They had known God, they had experienced God in nature, and they knew God as the creator.... And then, they had seen God in history. They had seen the wicked prosper. And they had seen the wicked rise high... and then soon, they noticed the wicked being cut down like a green bay tree. And they knew that there was a

54 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Discerning the Signs of History," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 15 November 1964, King Library and Archives, 6.

moral structure in the universe.==

In the midst of the darkest of the nation's circumstances (militarism, poverty and racial injustice), King had hope. His hope was rooted in the idea that God was involved in the process of human history, bringing about goodness, beauty and truth. In his sermon entitled "Discerning The Signs of History," he said:

There is a process in history. There are certain laws in the universe not only certain natural laws but certain moral laws. There are certain lessons in history... God still reigns in history.... For more than 240 years Africa was raped and plundered. Her native Kingdom disorganized. Her people and ruler demoralized. We live with that system right here 244 years [later]. And then for a period it looked like we were gonna get out with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, but we were only half-way out. It was long after the signing of that great document, after the period of reconstruction, that black cause came into being, the Klu Klux Klan started riding. In 1896, the Supreme Court itself got on board and rendered the Pressey vs Ferguson decision establishing the doctrine of separate but equal as the law of the land. It looked like we were doomed to stay in slavery and segregation forever. But evil, carries the seed of its own destruction. And God spoke to nine men in 1954, on May 17th, they examined the legal body of segregation pronounced it constitutional dead. And ever since this, things have been changing.==

The prophet breaks the numbness of the royal conscience by envisioning something new. It is not (says Brueggemann)

55 Martin Luther King, Jr., "But, If Not," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 5 November 1967, King Library and Archives, 2-5.

56 King, "Discerning the Signs of History," 2-5.

the prophet's responsibility to implement the new realities, only envision them; for implementation presupposes imagination. In "A Christmas Sermon" King said:

And so this is our faith, as we continue to hope for peace on earth and goodwill toward men: let us know that in the process we have cosmic companionship. In 1963, on a sweltering August afternoon, we stood in Washington, D.C., and talked to the nation about many things. Toward the end of that afternoon, I tried to talk to the nation about a dream that I had had, and I must confess to you today that not long after talking about that dream I started seeing it turn into a nightmare.... Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes, but in spite of that I close today by saying I still have a dream, because, you know, you can't give up in life. If you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that help you to go on in spite of it all. And so today I still have a dream. I have a dream that one day men will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as brothers. I still have a dream this morning that one day every Negro in this country, every colored person in the world, will be judged on the basis of the content of his character rather than the color of his skin, and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. I still have a dream today that one day the idle industries of Appalachia will be revitalized, and the empty stomachs of Mississippi will be filled, and brotherhood will be more than a few words at the end of a prayer, but rather the first order of business on every legislative agenda. I still have a dream today that one day justice will roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.⁵⁷

The tension of holding criticizing and energizing together is further seen in his sermon entitled "What Are

 57 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Christmas Sermon," Preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 24 December, 1967, King Library and Archives, 4-5.

Your New Year's Resolutions?"

And don't forget, my friends, that the Pentagon has a budget of about 80 billion dollars. And a nation that spends that much money for military pursuits, is headed toward its own spiritual and moral doom. And look how much we're spending to end slums. If we would take the money that we use for space adventures... trying to put a man in outer space, and we haven't even learned to walk together down here on this earth as brothers and sisters... think of what we could do... so many things. Nobody needs to be unemployed in our country. Everybody should have a living, decent wage, and it's possible. Think of what medical science could do. If we put the money in there, they would be transplanting hearts all over America. People wouldn't have to be dying because they have heart attacks, or heart problems. Those who were born with brain damage, we could transplant brains... these things are possible.⁵⁸

The new realities of a "beloved community" are here. We would live together as brothers and sisters in a just peace. Nations would beat their swords into plowshares, and economic justice would prevail. No one would be unemployed and everyone would have a decent wage. All of this is envisioned here. No attempt is made to develop a plan for implementation; the prophetic task is to envision.

That which energizes the most is what Brueggemann refers to as doxology. Prophetic doxology is the transforming of fear into energy via song.⁵⁹ Doxology serves as a catharsis for the community of faith. It brings to con-

58 Martin Luther King, Jr., "What Are Your New Year's Resolutions?," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 7 Jan. 1968, King Library and Archives, 3-4.

59 Brueggemann, 27.

sciousness and to expression the grief and fear experienced by the community in an effort to transform it by appropriating God's freedom as its own.

Such an idea is explicit in King's sermon entitled "Interruptions." In talking about the way to handle life's interruptions he said:

There is what I think of as the healthy way. And it is the creative way. It is a way where somehow, you make the interruptions pay and produce. Using them to add new heights to our stature. In other words the way to deal with the interruptions of life is to face them as realities. But then develop something on the inside of you that gives you the power to endure them, and thereby transcend them.⁶⁰

Having said this, King goes on to expound the point by using four illustrations. In the fourth, he tells of two stories that he read in a Knoxville paper, both of them reporting very similar experiences. Two young men had been jilted by their girlfriends. One jumped off the Henly bridge and the other wrote a song, "Good Night Irene," which earned him more than seventy-five thousand dollars. King goes on to say:

Oh, when life's problems hit you, don't jump, but somehow think up a song... Oh, I would say to you that Handel was down low; and there was a day when Handel was all but to break down physically. He had no money; creditors were hounding him, ready to send him off to jail. And he had about given up. But he didn't jump; and I'm glad he didn't jump, because at that last moment he wrote the Hallelujah Chorus of the Great Messiah... They tell us that Schubert had a bad love affair; and

60 King, "Interruptions," 7.

I'm glad he didn't jump because in that moment, it was the period that he wrote the beauty of Ave Maria. Don't jump, produce a song. And I'm glad this morning, that my foreparents and your foreparents didn't jump... stood back there during the dark days of slavery, and the anguish, and the ache, and the agony of slavery, but they didn't jump. They produced a song,... "I got shoes, you got shoes, all of God's children got shoes. When I get to heaven I'm going to put on my shoes, and I'm just going to walk all over God's heaven. By and by, by and by I'm going to lay down my heavy load. I know my robe's going to fit me well, 'cause I tried it on at the gates of hell." Don't jump, just produce a song.⁶¹

It is, as Brueggemann rightly suggests, that the focus of the language of doxology is on God. The song can be sung because God's freedom is the community's freedom. It is the community's freedom because God choose to give it to them in creation, and God is watching over it to see that it comes to fruition. In concluding the sermon King said:

Produce a song, and you'll deal with the interruptions of life. And finally it means just going on anyhow. You have something in there which says that "I have a determination, an in spite of...quality." And this is what those who have been touched by the power of God and the spirit of Christ are able to do. And you look at them in sickness. You look at them in disappointment. You look at them in the agony of poverty, and you wonder what it is that keeps them going. They have something on the inside. And I tell you what it is. It is ultimately a faith in God.⁶²

The idea of prophetic doxology is also evident in King's sermon entitled "A Christian Movement In a Revolu-

61 King, "Interruptions," 8-9.

62 King, "Interruptions," 9.

tionary Age." In it he said:

Our most important contribution to world peace can be made as we finish the political reforms of this nation and demonstrate to the world that democracy can work and that men of different colors and national origins can live together and work together and play together. Nevertheless, this is no time for good men to be silent, and the prophetic words "Thus saith the Lord" must be spoken in the United Nations no less than in the legislature of the state of Mississippi. There are those who look out upon this world in all of its revolutionary turmoil and predict that the end is near at hand; there is one message which a Christian Movement must continue to make clear, and that is that this is still my Father's world, that God is a revolutionary God, and that he can overcome the forces of evil and destruction in our midst. "Harder yet may be the fight, right may often yield to might, wickedness a while may reign, Satan's cause may seem to gain. There is a God that rules above with hands of power and heart to love. If I am right, he will fight my battle, and I shall have peace some day. I do not know how long twil be, nor what the future holds for me. But this I know, if Jesus leads me I shall get home some day."⁶³

The prophet is a spokesperson from God, called by God to speak an irresistible and inescapable word. The call is the presentation of the prophet's credentials as James Sanders suggests, establishing the prophet's authority or right to speak. It shows, says Sanders, that the prophets believed that they had stood in the presence of God to receive God's word -- that they had an audience with God and

63 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Christian Movement in a Revolutionary Age," Sermon, n.p., n.d., King Library and Archives, 8.

from God had received specific commission to perform.⁶⁴
 King was very explicit about his calling and presented his credentials whenever demanded. In his sermon entitled "Thou Foul," delivered at Mount Pisgah Baptist Church in Chicago, having just been introduced, he said:

It makes me feel very humble and such encouraging words give me renewed courage and vigor, to carry on in the struggle for freedom and human dignity... But this morning I did not come to Mount Pisgah to give a Civil Rights address, I have to do a lot of that, I have to make numerous Civil Rights speeches. But before I was a Civil Rights leader, I was a preacher of the Gospel. This was my first calling, and it still remains, my greatest commitment. You know actually all that I do in Civil Rights, I do because I consider it a part of my ministry. I have no other ambitions in life but to achieve excellence in the Christian ministry.⁶⁵

King's enunciation of his call is further seen in his sermon entitled "Guidelines For a Constructive Church." In it he said:

I was talking with a preacher the other day and he said his members, a few of his members, were saying that [too much talk about Civil Rights in the church]. I said don't pay any attention to them. Because number one the members didn't anoint you to preach.... For the guidelines made it very clear that God anointed, no member of Ebenezer Baptist Church called me to the ministry. You called me to Ebenezer and you may turn me out of here but you can't turn me out of the ministry because I got my guidelines and my anointment from God almighty, and anything I want to say I'm going to say it from this pulpit. It may hurt somebody, I don't know about that, somebody may not agree

64 James A. Sanders, Torah and Canon (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 58-59.

65 King, "Thou Fool," 2.

with it, but when God speaks who can but prophesy. The word of God is upon me like fire shut up in my bones and when God gets upon me, I've got to say it, I got to tell it all over everywhere. And God has called me to deliver those that are in captivity... I'd rather follow the guidelines of God than to follow the guidelines of men.⁶⁶

Indeed, King has had an audience with God. ("I got my guidelines from God Almighty.") His authority to speak, does not come from the believing community that ordained him and called him as pastor. ("....members didn't anoint you to preach.") Rather, the authority comes from God. King believes this so strongly that he is willing to forfeit the office of pastor/prophet. ("You called me to Ebenezer and you may turn me out of here but you can't turn me out of the ministry.") He is ready to leave the community rather than not speak what God would have him say.

The call is a call to speak an irresistible and incapable word ("When God speaks who can but prophesy.") King further articulates this idea by paraphrasing the prophetic words of Jeremiah (20:9) as he says, "The word of God is upon me like fire shut up in my bones and when God gets upon me, I've got to say it, I got to tell it all over everywhere." To speak an irresistible word is to speak (Heschel) whether people want to hear or not. King said: "Anything I want to say I'm going to say it from this pul-

 66 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Guidelines for a Constructive Church," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 5 June 1966, King Library and Archives, 5.

pit. His prophetic calling is seen again in his sermon entitled "Transformed Nonconformist." King told a story about a young, white theological student who had heard him speak at Duke University and agreed with what he had said, but would not act because the majority opinion was against him. King commented:

Look at it [numbness of the royal conscience] over our nation. Whether people like to hear it or not, some voices must cry out. There's something wrong with this world, and I want the record straight, I'm against war. I want the record straight, I hear the words of the prophecy this morning. I hear the words of prophecy saying that there must be a day when men will beat their sword into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, nation will not rise up against nation, and neither will they study war any more.⁶⁷

To be called by God is not just to be called to one's own community. Rather, to be called by God (Heschel) places the prophet in a relationship that transcends the prophet's own community. Having established that King fits the prophetic paradigm, the task is to determine the significance and implication of King as a modern day prophet.

Significance of King As a Modern Day Prophet

A proper understanding of King is obtained only by seeing him as a biblical prophetic monotheist. This is the universal quality that is often missing in King scholarship.

67 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Transformed Nonconformist," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 16 January, 1966, King Library and Archives, 5.

King can never be fully understood in light of the social gospel, personalism, satyagrahic nonviolence, Christian Realism or the Black Christian Tradition. For they all fail to capture this universal dimension of King's character. King's call to be a prophet places him in a relationship that transcends his community. Evidence for such a claim is found in his sermon entitled "Is The Universe Friendly?" In emphasizing the breath of God's love for humankind he said:

Now if you turn to the early days of the Old Testament you will discover that they had a sort of tribal God.... It was not until the eighth century prophets came along, and later Jesus Christ and the writers of the New Testament, to remind men that God is not the god of a particular race, God is not the god of a particular tribe, God is not the god of a particular group, but Jesus talks about him and he has us to pray about him. He says that we must say, "Our Father."⁶⁸

It was the prophets (of both testaments) says King who reminded the people that God was the god of all. Likewise, it is King who must remind his own race and nation that God is the god of all. In his sermon entitled "Who Is My Neighbor?", he tells the story about a little black boy who was struck by an automobile in front of a segregated hospital, and died by the time he was transported to the black hospital. After the story he said:

Whenever you are concerned only with your own group, so to speak, with your own race, or with your own class, you will end up doing some of the

68 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Is the Universe Friendly?" Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 12 December 1965, King Library and Archives, 5.

most inhuman things, and ungodly things in history. And I'm so grateful to Jesus for this parable [Good Samaritan]. For this man forgot about his race. I'm tired of race anyway. I'm concerned about people, not just black men, not just white men, not just brown men, but all men. For they're all children of a common father. And until mankind rises above race and class and nations, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own power, and instruments.⁶⁹

King also reminds the nation that God is the god of all in his sermon entitled "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam." In it he said:

... another burden of responsibility was placed upon me in 1964. I cannot forget the Nobel Peace Prize was not just something taking place, but it was a commission -- a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for the brotherhood of man. This is a calling that takes me beyond the national allegiances but even if it were not present, I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me, the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men -- the communists, the capitalists, for their children and ours, for black and white, for revolutionary and conservative?... I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood.⁷⁰

Finally, the specific way in which the prophet achieves this universality is by bringing the world into divine focus

69 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Who is My Neighbor?" Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 18 February 1968, King Library and Archives, 5.

70 King, "Vietnam," 7.

(Heschel). Universality is not achieved by aspiration to some all encompassing principle; rather it is achieved by pronouncing both the judgment and salvation of God (Scott) as expressions of the divine will. In King's sermon entitled "Standing By the Best In An Evil Time," we find evidence of such oracles.

Jesus established a principle that the spirit is mightier than the sword.... Will you stand by that principle, that principle which represents the best. Because in these evil times men live by the philosophy that the sword is mightier than the spirit. And oh I weep for my nation. And I must think about the fact that I live in a country that is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.... I was reading the New York Times and it's editorial. It came to the point of saying that somewhere this madness must stop... It went on to say that our government is pursuing a policy that is going to destroy this whole world.... This madness must stop. And I'll tell you my friends I'm going to stand by my convictions. I'm going to stand by the principle that the spirit is mightier than the sword. The judgment of God is on America now. You know what tells me the judgment of God is on us? Here we are the richest and most powerful nation in the world. At war with one of the smallest poorest nations in the world and we can't even win it. That ought to show us that something is wrong.⁷¹

The indictment here is against "men who live by the philosophy that the sword is mightier than the spirit." We are (says King) the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. The connecting link to divine judgment is voiced as "somewhere this madness must stop...." The sentence of the

 71 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Standing by the Best in an Evil Time," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 6 August 1967, King Library and Archives, 6-7.

judge is offered as "our government is pursuing a policy that is going to destroy this whole world."

The judgment oracle is never pronounced alone, for the prophetic task is the proclamation of both judgment and salvation. We can never arrive at the salvation oracle without the judgment oracle. The salvation oracle in this sermon takes the second form, the promise of deliverance is presented as an alternative to judgment and is conditioned on the nation's response to live by the philosophy that the spirit is mightier than the sword. If we do this, then God will be our "Holy Warrior" and will deliver us from destruction. King said:

And I've decided what I'm going to do, I ain't going to kill nobody in Mississippi and I don't plan to kill anybody in Vietnam, and I ain't going to study war no more... I don't care who doesn't like what I say about it. I don't care who criticizes me in an editorial, I don't care what white person or Negro criticizes me. I'm going to stick with the best.... there comes a time when a true follower of Jesus Christ must take a stand that's neither safe nor political nor popular but he must take that stand because it is right. Every now and then we sing about it, if you are right, God will fight your battle. I'm going to stick by the best during these evil times.⁷²

The pronouncement of judgment and salvation is seen again in King's sermon entitled "What Are Your New Year's Resolutions?" In it he said:

I'm tired now of hearing a lot of talk about peace. You see, the problem is that, they are talking about peace as a goal, and not as a means

72 King, "Evil Times," 7.

by which you arrive at that goal. Now we're going to keep on having wars until men come to see that peace is not only a goal we seek, but it is a path we follow to arrive at that goal.... I'm against war in general, and I'm really against the war in Vietnam in particular. I'm against it because of its injustice... and anybody who knows the history and development of that war, realizes that it is one of the most tragic evils and injustices ever perpetrated on a nation... and we are destroying that country... Going down this dark and tragic road... the most hated nation in the world. There isn't a single official of our country who can go anywhere in the world without being stoned, and eggs being thrown at him... anywhere they go in the world. And it's because we have taken on to ourselves a kind of arrogance of power. We've ignored the mandates of justice and morality.⁷³

The indictment here is against those who talk about, "peace as a goal and not as a means by which you arrive at the goal." The connecting link to divine judgment is "we're going to keep on having wars...." The sentence of the judge is that "we are destroying that country... [we are] the most hated nation in the world."

The salvation oracle in this instance takes the fourth form as the prophet, standing under the present judgment of God, looks to a day of restoration.

And I made my resolution. I'm going to keep on working for that day, when men will beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. And nations will not rise up against nations.... neither will they study war anymore.⁷⁴

King, here, sees himself as a prophet in the school of

73 King, "New Year's Resolution," 2.

74 King, "Resolutions," 3.

Isaiah. Just as judgment is pronounced against Babylon for its arrogance (Isa. 13:1-16), so is King pronouncing judgment against an arrogant America. Isaiah, says G. G. D. Kilpatrick, depicts God as the instigator of war,⁷⁵ while King sees war as an unchecked evil which makes strife inevitable. War, says Kilpatrick, is always a judgment on the sin that causes it. It is itself sin which brings its own retribution, precisely because God is on the throne and the moral laws of God's government are inescapable and inexorable.⁷⁶ King in essence, declares that God can and does use the very disasters caused by human sin for the ultimate good of humanity.

The salvation oracle in this instance is the very words of Isaiah 2:4. The words themselves, says Kilpatrick, are probably from some unknown author, since both Isaiah and Micah make use of them. Isaiah has made them his own as the very word of God for humanity,⁷⁷ and King here has done the same.

The pronouncement of judgment and salvation is seen once again in King's sermon entitled "Why I'm Opposed to the War in Vietnam." In it he said:

 75 G. G. D. Kilpatrick, "Isaiah," The Interpreters Bible, vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 256.

76 Kilpatrick, 258.

77 Kilpatrick, 180.

.... don't let anybody make you think that God chose America as His divine messianic force to be a sort of policeman of the whole world. God has a way of standing before the nations with judgment and it seems that I can hear God saying to America, you are too arrogant. If you don't change your ways, I will rise up and break the backbone of your power and I will place it in the hands of a nation that doesn't even know my name. Be still and know that I am God.⁷⁸

The indictment here is against an arrogant America. ("I can hear God saying to America, you are too arrogant.") The connecting link to divine judgment is very explicit. ("God has a way of standing before the nations with judgment.") The sentence of the judge is also given. ("I will rise up and break the backbone of your power....")

The illusion here is to Isaiah again. Just as God raised up the Medes to overthrow Babylon in Isaiah's case, so will God raise up a nation to overthrow or break the backbone of America's power. The underlying premise of such a claim is one that is very prevalent in the prophetic corpus. It is that God is free -- free to bring about the divine will in history in whatever way and by whomever God so chooses.

The salvation oracle in this instance takes the fourth form.

I have long since learned that being a follower of Jesus Christ means taking up the cross. My Bible tells me that Good Friday comes before Easter. Before the crown we wear there is the cross that we must bear. Let us bear it, bear it for truth,

78 King, "Vietnam," 17.

bear it for justice and bear it for peace.... I have not lost faith. I am not in despair because I know there is a moral order. I have not lost faith because the arch of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.⁷⁹

Here King, in the very salvation oracle itself, holds together both judgment and hope. There can be no Easter without Good Friday. The salvation/hope of Easter is inextricably woven into Good Friday. Good Friday is the divine judgment out of which the hope of Easter comes; and so it is with the cross and the crown. Salvation then is ultimately rooted in the moral order which is, in essence, an expression of the divine will.

King's role and message as a minister was based on the biblical prophetic tradition. It is from his message that we gather his own conception of himself as a prophet.

79 King, "Vietnam," 17.

CHAPTER 3

King: A Prophetic Radical Monotheist

Much of King's ethical thought is traceable to historical and intellectual sources as previously identified by Smith and Zepp, and David Garrow.¹ However, the source that they have overlooked is the biblical prophetic tradition. The prophets, as Sanders suggests, were radical monotheists.² It is this prophetic characteristic of radical monotheism that provides the rubric for King's distinct use of historical and intellectual sources. Moses proclaimed to Israel that there was but one God ("Hear, O Israel: The Lord Our God is One Lord.") and that it was to this God that their ultimate allegiance was due ("And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.")³ King's proclamation to America was the same. America, in King's estimation, was a henotheistic society (loyal to one god among many), parading under the guise of monotheism. America may have been worshipping God but only as one among many gods

1 For an in-depth treatment of the historical and intellectual sources of King's ethical thought see Smith and Zepp.

2 Sanders, 74.

3 Deuteronomy 6:4 (RSV).

(including nationalism, sectarianism and individualism). Gods, as the term is used herein, is defined in the words of H. Richard Niebuhr as those value-centers and causes that command our loyalty.⁴

Without a monotheistic hermeneutic, right action becomes provincially defined. King attributes such a narrow ethical perspective to intellectual and spiritual blindness. In his sermon entitled "Love and Forgiveness," he talks about the expressions of intellectual and spiritual blindness of those who crucified Jesus as seen from Jesus' prayer on the cross: "....they know not what they do." Blindness, King says, was their trouble. He further illustrates this point by saying:

This tragic blindness expresses itself in many ominous ways in our contemporary life. Some men feel for instance that war is the answer to the problems of the world. They talk sincerely about a balance of terror and they talk about brinkmanship. They are not bad people. So often they clothe their ideas in the garments of patriotism.⁵

King's critique of America's henotheism is further enuciated in his sermon entitled "Who Is My Neighbor." In it he said:

Now, when you develop a universal altruism, your loyalties are far beyond your tribe, your race, your class, your nation, even. When you fail to

4 H. Richard Niebuhr, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 24.

5 King, "Love and Forgiveness," 6-7.

have a universal altruism, you will say, "My nation right or wrong...."⁶

King challenged national patriotism as a value-center (god). When our ultimate orientation is in society, says Niebuhr, when it is our value-center and cause, then the social mores can make anything right and anything wrong.⁷

What America was trying to make right was its presence in Vietnam. Anyone who was not for America in Vietnam, was not for America. King suggests that our ultimate allegiance should not be to America (right or wrong), but to God. "I'm not going to support my nation when it's wrong, because my first (ultimate) loyalty is to humanity, and to God."⁸ He goes on to say:

You remember the early Old-Testament days, God was considered a tribal God. And so the ethic, became a tribal ethic.... "Thou shalt not kill" really meant thou shalt not kill a fellow Israelite, but for God's sake kill a Philistine.... Now, what are the devastating consequences of this narrow, group-centered attitude? It means that you really don't care what happens to somebody outside of your group. If Americans are concerned only about America, they aren't concerned about what happens to other people in other nations.... Have you ever thought about it? Why is it that it is a crime to murder somebody in your own nation? If you murder somebody right in America, it's a crime.... But at the same time, if you murder somebody of another nation in war, it's an act of heroic virtue. Why is that? It's because of a narrow ethical basis for all of your actions.⁹

6 King, "Who Is My Neighbor?" 3.

7 Niebuhr, 26.

8 King, "Neighbor," 3.

9 Ibid., 3-5.

If there is but one and only one God (beyond the human value-centers and causes as radical monotheism asserts), and if this God acts in a parental way toward us, then all of those who place their ultimate allegiance in God are children of God. King makes this point in "A Christmas Sermon."

Now let me say that the next thing we must be concerned about if we are to have peace on earth and goodwill toward men is the nonviolent affirmation of the sacredness of all human life. Every man is somebody because he is a child of God.... Man is a child of God, made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such. Until nations see this everywhere, we will be fighting wars. One day somebody should remind us that, even though there may be political and ideological differences between us, the Vietnamese are our brothers, the Russians are our brothers, the Chinese are our brothers; and one day we've got to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.¹⁰

Just as the biblical prophets sought to challenge this revered and holy belief of a tribal God and its subsequent ethical implications, King sought to do the same. The neighbor to whom we are to love as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18) is now redefined by monotheism from being a fellow-Israelite (or in King's case, a fellow-American) to all human life.

Who is my neighbor? "I do not know his name," says Jesus, "But life will reveal him to you." He is anyone toward whom you prove neighborly. He is anyone who lies in need at life's roadside. Who is my neighbor? He is neither Jew nor Gentile; he is neither Russian nor American; he is neither

¹⁰ King, "A Christmas Sermon," 3.

Negro nor White; he is a certain man, any needy man on one of the numerous highways of life. He is not of this or that religious faith. He is not a Catholic or a Protestant. He is not of one class or one nation. You will find him as you journey life's highway. Who is my neighbor? He's a certain man. He is anyone toward whom you are neighborly.¹¹

Not only does montheism cause us to redefine the neighbor, but it prompts us to reinterpret the torah as well. The torah is not just the story of God acting on behalf of a privileged/elect group for their identity alone. (America is not God's messianic force in the world, says King.) But now the torah is for anyone who accepts the witness of the salvific work of God in human history and places faith therein. The One God beyond the many then becomes the value-center and cause. This, for King, is what makes life worth living; it is a cause (eternally true) for which one is willing to die. The torah is now reinterpreted in light of monotheism as opposed to its henotheistic context.

This is where tribal ethic always lead [says King]. It always leads one to substitute some for all. The Declaration of Independence was written almost two hundred years ago.... Seventeen seventy six.... And you know, I'm wondering whether we, the black people of America will be able to celebrate that two hundreth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. You know why? Because it has never had any real meaning in terms of implementation in our lives. "All men are created equal," meant, in so many instances, "all white men are created equal." And never forget that [the] men who wrote that document owned slaves. And this has been a part of the ambivalence and the vacillation [by] so many seg-

11 King, "Neighbor," E.

ments of white America on the question of racial equality for the black man. The Constitution was too often "Let there for some...." and not all. It didn't have a universal quality; the Declaration of Independence, the same thing. And this is why we have the problems that we have in our nation today. You see, whenever you fail to have a universal altruism, you will end up treating persons as things.¹²

King sees America's torah as solidly structured on the insights of the Judeo-Christian heritage. It is the placement of faith in the nation's story, as opposed to faith in the God who gave the nation the story, that has caused the nation's problem. King challenges the revered belief of America in a zionistic theology. He sees it as scandalous and pretentious to think that God will always be with America solely because God gave America a torah story. King in essence, suggests that after the torah comes covenant. Further, if the community does not remain a covenant people, then the radically free God can raise up a new covenant people who do not even know God's name.

America's henotheism manifests itself not only in nationalism but in sectarianism as well. Racism was, in King's view, the placement of faith by white America in the principle of their closed society and the belief that they were a superior race. Racial purity and segregation, therefore, became their value-center (god). In his sermon entitled "Mastering Our Fears" he said:

 12 King, "Neighbor," 4.

.... racial segregation is buttressed by certain irrational fears. You know it's easy to see these fears. Fears of losing a preferred economic position.... fear of an altered social status.... and then comes that great fear.... fear of intermarriage. Now all of these are irrational fears. First thing.... individuals marry not races.... Nobody talks about inter-marriage in Jamaica or in South America. You don't get to discuss it anywhere much, but in America and South Africa. Because the presupposition of anyone who has to make that an issue, is that the Negro, the member of the so-called out-group, has a kind of impurity.... a kind of X contaminate [that defiles] the worthfulness and the purity of the in-group. What is racism but the notion that one group represents inferiority and another group represents superiority.... and what is it but the notion that God made a creative error.... what is it but the notion that somehow there are worthless human beings in one race, and worthfull human beings in another race.¹³

Radical monotheism, says Niebuhr, is put to the test whenever in-group and out-group are distinguished.¹⁴ King is verbalizing that (race distinction) which is implicitly known in the society. The standard by which one judges ones action, is the standard of loyalty to the community (closed society).¹⁵ King cites the consequence of such henotheism in his sermon entitled "Good Samaritan," as evident in what he identifies as the philosophy of the robber.

Now, the first philosophy is the philosophy of the robber. And that philosophy says, "What is yours in mine. And if you don't give it to me, I'll

13 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Mastering Our Fears," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 10 September 1967, King Library and Archives, 6.

14 Niebuhr, 28.

15 Niebuhr, 28.

take it from you." That's the philosophy of the robber.... Robbery takes many forms.... Society robs in strange and tragic ways. Race trample over other races with the iron feet of oppression. Some of the most glaring expressions of robbery [are seen in the] Black men [who] were brought to this country, in 1619 from the soils of Africa. For two hundred and forty four years of the most tragic robbery that mankind has ever known. And it didn't stop with that. I've been living in the slums of Chicago over the last six months.... I see anew.... how black men and women by the thousand are robbed of an adequate education.... how black men and women by the thousands are robbed of a good job. So the Negro finds himself living in a triple ghetto.... a ghetto of poverty, a ghetto of race, a ghetto of human misery.... The story of day to day robbery.¹⁶

The conduct of the in-group toward the out-group is justifiable because the standard by which right action is determined is loyalty to the closed society (white race). King, as a radical prophetic monotheist, challenges this cherished institution by proposing a new standard by which conduct is to be determined, namely, loyalty to the One God beyond the many.

When faith in the social value-centers of nationalism and sectarianism is dissolved, says Niebuhr, the dissolution of such faith may call forth an effort to substitute self for society.¹⁷ It is an attempt to make isolated selfhood both value-center and cause.¹⁸ Pleasurable existence, says

 16 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Good Samaritan," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 28 August 1966, King Library and Archives, 3-5.

17 Niebuhr, 28.

18 Niebuhr, 28.

Niebuhr, becomes a kind of cause.¹⁹ The maintenance and enhancement of a pleasurable state of feeling is now the standard by which conduct is measured.²⁰ King challenges individualism as a value-center in his sermon entitled "Training Your Child In Love."

....instill within your child an unselfish, an altruistic, concern for others. In other words, don't only instill within your child a love for self, but instill within your child at an early age love for other selves, a love for neighbor. Now you know some people go all through life and they never get beyond loving themselves. You've seen people like that, they only develop a utilitarian love for other people, they only love people that they can use. And they see other people as mere steps by which they climb to their personal ambitions. And to my mind [there] is nothing more tragic than to find an individual who loves himself so much that he doesn't love anybody else. And I submit to you this morning that one has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.²¹

The proper training of a child says King, is in the admonition of love. He submits that there must be a healthy, rational and moral concern for self and then a love for other selves (neighbor). We cannot love other selves until we first love ourselves properly, says King. However, in loving one's self, selfhood must never become a value-

19 Niebuhr, 28.

20 Niebuhr, 28.

21 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Training Your Child In Love," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 8 May 1966, King Library and Archives, 4.

center. Whenever we make ourselves value-centers, we develop only a utilitarian love for others. We use others as means to maintain and enhance our state of pleasurable existence. We use others says King, as mere steps by which to climb to our personal ambitions. When self becomes a value-center, we will (in the words of Micah) devise iniquity and work evil upon our beds and, when morning comes, go out to practice it because it is in the power of our hand. We will covet our neighbor's field and house and take them by violence. We will oppress him, his house and his heritage,²² all for our own pleasure. We will, as Amos asserts, lie upon beds of ivory and stretch ourselves upon our couches, and eat lambs out of our flocks, and calves out of our stalls and drink wine out of bowls, and anoint ourselves with fine oils and not be concerned about the poverty of our neighbor in the midst of our superfluous wealth.²³

For radical monotheism, the value-center is neither nationalism, sectarianism nor individualism. Rather, its reference is to the One beyond all the many, from which the many derive their being.²⁴ King enunciates this radical monotheism in his sermon entitled "Levels of Love." If there is one word, he says, that describes the ethic of

²² Micah 2:23.

²³ Amos 6:4-5 (RSV).

²⁴ Niebuhr, 32.

Jesus Christ, it is the word love. The one word, says King, that characterizes the height of the Christian life is "love." Very few people realize the depth of the meaning of love, he says, because there are different types or levels of love. King then identifies the levels of love: utilitarian, friendly, romantic and humanitarian. Having done this, he goes on to say:

So this leads me to the highest [level of love] expressed in the Greek term "Agape." This is "Christian love." And what is "Christian love"? It is the love of God operating in the human heart. So that.... the object of love is not the thing that arouses your love because its something in the object of love. You begin to love everybody for their sake. All other forms of love, you love for your sake. But when you come to "Christian love," you love people for their sake.... You love people if they are white, you love them if they are black.... You love them if they are intergrationist, you love them if they are segregationist. You love them if they are Democrats in America, you love them if they are Communist in Russia and China. You love everybody, because God loves them. That is the meaning of "Christian love." Somehow, you come to the point of loving every man. It's a spontaneous overflowing love that seeks nothing in return. This is what Jesus meant when he talked about love. He was talking about a love.... that was universal enough to include everybody.²⁵

When our faith and loyalty is to the One beyond the many, we develop a love universal enough to include everyone. Because God created us all, says King, out of one blood, all humankind are kindred. It is the inescapable

²⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Levels of Love," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 21 May 1967, King Library and Archives, 1-7.

network of mutuality, he says, in which we are caught; it is the inter-related structure of reality. Radical monotheism, therefore, requires of us a love even for our enemies. But what does it really mean to love one's enemies? King articulates his position in this regards in a sermon entitled "Love Your Enemies," delivered at Howard University, Washington D.C.

....love in the final analysis means understanding creative good will to all men; it simply means that you will do nothing to defeat anybody. You work to defeat evil systems, but not individuals who are caught up in those evil systems. This is the meaning of love, and I believe this is what Jesus means when he says, "Love your enemies;" that you seek to defeat no individual; that you only seek to uplift him.... you love men not because they are likable, but because God loves them. You love them not because they are worthless to you, but because they are worthless to God....you love the individual who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does.... And I am very happy that he did not say like your enemies. There are some people who are pretty difficult to like.... But Jesus says, love them. Like is an affectionate sort of thing, but love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will; and this is what Jesus means when he says love your enemies.²⁶

The prophetic characteristic of radical monotheism requires us to love our enemies by seeing them as neighbors and companions in being within a universal context.²⁷ It is, therefore, in King's radical monotheism that we find the

²⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love Your Enemies," Journal of Religious Thought 27, no. 2 (Summer Supplement 1970) :34-35.

²⁷ Niebuhr, 34.

fundamental experience of the prophet (Heschel): fellowship with the feelings of God and sympathy with the divine pathos. The ultimate expression of this is a creative redemptive goodwill for our enemies. It is an attempt to place ourselves in our enemies' situation, that we might understand the conditions which caused them to be our enemies.

CHAPTER 4

Prophecy and Black Preaching

The prophet was called by God to speak the divine word. Though the word was irresistible and inescapable, it was not overpowering to the point of divine dictation. It was a word from God clothed in the prophet's own indigenous expression. The call of Amos suffices as an example for our consideration. Amos makes it clear that he was not a prophet by profession nor training. Rather, he was a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees -- a layman, an amateur, from Tekoa (Amos 7:14) who found himself prophesying in the temple at Bethel.¹ His call suggests that his proclamation of the divine word was not a learned response but an indigenous one. It was, as Phillips Brooks suggests, divine truth through personality.²

King and the Black Church

Although King was an ordained baptist minister by profession and a systematic theologian by training, his call provided the opportunity for an indigenous expression of the

1 James M. Ward, The Prophets (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 55.

2 Phillips Brooks, Lectures on Preaching (1914; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 5-6.

divine word. It was the Black Christian Tradition which provided the context for the expression of King's prophetic ministry. King grew up in a black parsonage on Auburn Avenue, in a middle-class section of black Atlanta. His father (M. L. King, Sr.) and his grandfather (Adam Daniel Williams) were baptist preachers. His home life says Stephen Gates, centered around worship. Days began and ended with family prayer. At dinner, all of the King children were required (by orders from their father) to recite scriptures. After dinner, their grandmother (Williams) read them vivid biblical stories.

The [black] church, says Gates, was King's second home. His close friends were in his Sunday-school classes, and after Sunday school came regular worship in the sanctuary. After worship came Sunday dinner at the church, so that King was at church all day on Sunday and part of the afternoons and evenings on weekdays. The church defined his world.⁵

It was, says James Washington, the preachers of this tradition who managed to create and sustain the only consistent tradition of prophetic ministry in America. Ministry in America is an assimilation of the role of both the biblical prophet and priest. However, more often than not, the ministry is perceived in more of a priestly than prophetic

⁵ Stephen B. Gates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 14-16.

sense. Washington suggests that the black preacher managed to combine the two functions without either losing their distinctiveness. A historical sketch of black preaching provides us with the factors that attributed toward it's retention of the prophetic function.

Black Preaching Tradition

According to E. Franklin Frazier, blacks received Christian baptism from the beginning of their importation into the new world. The initial opposition to their Christening gradually disappeared when laws made it clear that slaves did not become free through their acceptance of the Christian faith and baptism. Although slaves were baptized and taken into the Anglican church during the seventeenth century, it was not until the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century (when the Methodists and Baptists began their revivals in the South) that large numbers of blacks were attracted to Christianity.

Frazier attributes to the preachers the enthusiastic response of the slaves to the proselytizing efforts of the Methodists and Baptists. Though such preachers lacked the education of the ministers of the Anglican church, they appealed to the poor, the ignorant, and the outcast.⁴ While the Anglican preachers, says Albert Raboteau, tended to be

4 E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America (New York: Schocken, 1962), 14-16.

didactic and moralistic, the Methodist and Baptist preachers visualized and personalized the drama of sin and salvation, of damnation and election. The Anglicans took more of a catechesic approach while, in contrast, the revivalist preachers helped the people to feel the weight of sin, to imagine the threats of Hell, and to accept Christ as their only Savior. Raboteau also attributes the enthusiasm of the camp meetings to the personal and emotional appeal of the preacher.⁵ In the crowds that attended the revivals and camp meetings, there were numbers of blacks who found the fiery message of salvation a hope and a prospect of escape from their earthly woes.⁶

It was from the white revivalist preachers of the camp meetings and revivals that the slave preacher acquired a character of preaching. According to John Blassingame, the slaves acquired many of their religious ideas at the camp meeting they attended with their masters. Slave preachers often reproduced the emotional sermons delivered by the white ministers they heard.⁷ A character of slave preaching, according to Frazier, was given by a Swedish woman who

5 Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 132-133.

6 Frazier, 16.

7 John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), 61.

visited near Charleston in 1851. She wrote:

I entered, and saw the assemblage of negroes, principally women, who were much edified and affected in listening to a Negro who was preaching to them with great fervor and great gesticulation, thumping on the table with his clinched fists. The sermon and substance of his sermon was this: "Let us do as Christ has commanded us; let us love one another. Then he will come to us on our sickbeds, on our deathbeds, and he will make us free, and we shall come to him and sit with him in glory."⁸

Not only do we see the emotionalism of the revivalist preacher, but also the prophetic overtones of appropriating God's freedom as the faith community's freedom. This is what the slavemasters feared most (inciting insurrection) about the slave preachers, and often forbade them on their estates. The salvemaster's claim was not unfounded. In 1800, Gabriel's Rebellion was planned against Richmond, Virginia. Preachings, or religious meetings, according to Raboteau, served as occasions for the recruitment of slaves and for plotting and organizing the insurrection. Gabriel's brother Martin, one of the plot's leaders, was known as a preacher and used the Bible to argue that their plans would succeed even against superior numbers.⁹

A majority of the slaves executed for conspiring to revolt in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822 were members

⁸ Frazier, 24, citing Frederike Bremer, Homes in the New World, trans. Mary Hourtt (New York, 1853), 1, 289-290.

⁹ Raboteau, 147.

of the city's African Methodist Church. Two of the conspirators were class leaders, and several witnesses implicated Morris Brown, pastor of the church, who was later elected a bishop. It was alleged that Denmark Vesey, the plot's leader, used scriptural texts to win supporters for the insurrection. Vesey, an ex-slave who had purchased his own freedom, read his Bible and found in it that slavery was wrong. In his deposition, says Raboteau, Vesey spoke of the creation of the world, in which he said that all men had equal rights, blacks as well as whites. And in 1831 the bloodiest slave revolt in U.S. history took place in Southampton, Virginia, under the leadership of Nat Turner who had the reputation of being a seer, a prophet, and a preacher.¹⁰

In Gabriel's Rebellion, it was Gabriel's brother Martin who espoused the idea of God as "Holy Warrior." The insurrection plan would succeed (he said) even though they were outnumbered, because God was their Holy Warrior who would come down from heaven and smite their enemy. In Vesey's insurrection, the idea of human freedom as an inherent part of the creation process served as the basis for his actions. Vesey was essentially reminding the nation of its torah. It was, however, a monotheistic reinterpretation of the torah. In Nat Turner's case, there is little doubt that he believed

¹⁰ Raboteau, 163-164.

that he had stood in the council of God and was acting out of a divine call. Prophetic overtures are present at the earliest stages of black preaching.

Because of the fear of insurrection, the slave preachers' ministry was limited, especially in the South. Laws were established forbidding them to exhort or preach in public.¹¹ Black congregations were forbidden to assemble without the presence of a white person, and those which were organized under the leadership of slave preachers were often suppressed. The autonomy of these separate black churches was short-lived and, by 1820, these churches were under the supervision of white pastors with the slave preachers often serving as associates.¹²

Blassingame gives the response of the slaves to these white preachers as told by W. H. Robinson. Slaves, says Robinson, frequently heard white preachers urge them to obey their masters; but this was not what they wanted to hear, so they would congregate after the white people retired.¹³ While whites might be carried away by religious frenzy at occasional camp meetings and revivals, slaves (reports Blassingame) had an even more intense emotional involvement

11. Raboteau, 135.

12. Raboteau, 137-138.

13. Blassingame, 64, citing W. H. Robinson, From Log Cabin to the Pulpit (Eau Claire, Wis., 1913), 79.

with their God every week in the praise meetings in their quarters. These praise meetings provided the context for the syncretism of African and Christian religious beliefs.¹⁴ It was these praise meetings of the slaves, in the hush harbors and slave quarters, which have become known as "the invisible institution."

Since all forms of organized social effort were forbidden among the slaves, says Frazier, and in the absence of an established priesthood, the slave preacher played the central role in the "invisible institution." The slave preacher was "called" to his office and, through his personal qualities, achieved a position of dominance. The call was identical to that of the biblical prophets. It came through some religious experience which indicated to them that they had been chosen by God as a spiritual leader. They believed, in essence, that they had had an audience with God. This authority, says Frazier, was given greater weight when the slave who had been called to preach was licensed by the Methodist or Baptist Church. The license to preach served as an acknowledgment and affirmation of the preacher's call to the ministry by the faith community. The slave preacher, asserts Frazier, needed to possess two basic qualifications: some knowledge of the bible and the ability

14 Blassingame, 64.

to sing.¹⁵ From the beginning of religious expression among the slaves, preaching and singing played significant roles in their worship.

The slave preacher emerged as the leader not only of the sacred affairs of the slaves but of the secular affairs as well. The leadership of the preacher, according to Frazier, was recognized by his "congregation" and extended as far as the white masters were willing to concede to him. This role among the slaves.¹⁶

Through the days of slavery (1619-1863), segregation (1863-1965) and now institutional racism (1965-), the black preacher has sought to bring to public expression the hurt of the people. Because of the divine call to this life of humanitarian service, the black preacher holds a unique place in black society. In 1903, W. E. B. Dubois wrote:

The preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist -- all these he is,.... The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his pre-eminence, and helps him maintain it.¹⁷

The factors, therefore, that attributed to the reten-

15 Frazier, 24-25.

16 Frazier, 25.

17 W. E. B. Dubois, The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago: McClurg, 1903), 190-191.

tion of the prophetic function in black preaching were: the preacher's call, the preacher's role as spokesperson for the faith community, and the faith community's social-historical context of oppression. The fight for justice resulting from this oppression says, James Cone, has always been an important ingredient in black religion. Black religion's existence as another reality, completely different from white religion (he asserts) is partly related to its grounding of black faith in the historical struggle of freedom.¹⁸ King, says Washington, was a product of this company of prophets, and accepted his "call" to be a part of this ministry even before he finished college.

The Essence of Black Preaching

From its earliest beginnings, Black preaching has been clearly characterized by great emphasis on personal style or individual variations. The most certain statement one can make about a black preaching style, says Henry Mitchell, is

18 James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury, 1975), 153. This writer is of the opinion that oppression, and the struggle for liberation which has characterized the Black Christian Tradition, are the primary contributors to the retention of the distinctiveness of the prophetic function in black preaching. While this function is distinct in select white preachers (see the sermons of Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbush and Reinhold Niebuhr), there was never a sustained prophetic ministry in that tradition, primarily because this ministry was and is a part of the political and ecclesiastical establishment. The classical confrontations of Amos and Amaziah, along with Jeremiah and Hananiah, suffice as examples.

that nothing is certain or fixed.¹⁹ Black preaching styles range from the purely emotional (sweating, spitting and stomping) to the presentation of a logical argument culminating in celebration. Style is an ever evolving process being pushed beyond itself by an educated clergy and pew. The four classical constituents of rhetoric suffice as a basis of organization for this inquiry into the essence of black preaching. They are invention, disposition, style and delivery.²⁰

The purpose of black preaching (and all Christian preaching) in a religiously pluralistic age is to persuade people toward Christian discipleship and to provide religious instruction. King is perhaps the epitome of the tradition in this regard. In his sermon entitled "Is The Universe Friendly," King gives religious instruction regarding the nature of God. In the sermon, he suggests that the distinguishable characteristic between God and humanity is that God is love. That can never be said about us, he says, because not only do we love but we hate as well. God's love, says King, is unceasing and eternal; it has breadth. For God loved humankind collectively and individually. Lastly, he says, God's love is spontaneously self-giving.

¹⁹ Henry H. Mitchell, Black Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 162.

²⁰ William H. Pipes, Say Amen, Brother! (New York: William Frederick, 1951), 72.

After having done this, King proceeds with his view toward persuasion.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son," and this is the unspeakable gift. This is the meaning of Christmas, that God has given us his everything and whosoever believeth in him, in the final analysis, whosoever is sufficiently committed to him, shall not perish. You'll have everlasting life. God's love is redemptive. God's love in a real sense gives life and light. Whosoever believeth in him will find himself. What is this text saying in the final analysis, but that Christ is the answer?²¹

This view toward persuasion is seen again in his sermon entitled "Who Are We?".

And the beauty of our gospel is that God, through Christ has provided a way.... that we could rise from the low places to the high places. Wherever you are today.... God through Christ can change you. No matter what habit has you in its grips; God through Christ can change you. No matter what your course may be; God through Christ can change you. And this is our hope for a better world. This is our hope for a better America; this is our hope for being better individuals.... Someone here, this morning needs to accept the Christ.... This is the time to make a decision for Christ.²²

The subject matter of black preaching is God. The primary source of King's ideas, information, and truths about God is the Bible. But King is not limited to the Bible as God's only source of revelation. History, tradition (Judeo-Christian) and life experiences are all sources

²¹ King, "Is The Universe Friendly?" 9-10.

²² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Who Are We?" Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 5 February 1964, King Library and Archives, 10-11.

of God's revealed truth. In enunciating the change that Christ can make in our lives, he goes on to illustrate it by saying:

Go on back through the ages and the bible tells us about it. Long years of Christian history tells us about it. That if we have the faith, God through Christ has the power. Look at a young man, as he grows and watch him as he develops; he's vacillating; his name is Simon. He stays around Christ. And watch him a little later, see him on the day of Pentecost as he preaches, until three thousand souls are converted. There is something within Christ, that can change a Simon of sand, into a Peter of rock.... Look at Augustine as he cries out, as he lives in adultery and fornication and cries out, "Lord make me pure, but not yet." But later on see that same Augustine as he's transformed from a sinner Augustine to a saint Augustine. God can do this. He can put his hands on you if you will only submit to him. And then we will truly know who we are.²³

King's mode of persuasion is personal, emotional and logical. It is the fusion of these three that now represents the zenith of black preaching. The slave preacher persuaded his listeners to follow Christ through a personal appeal. Being uneducated, it was his "call" by God to speak the divine word that impressed upon the listeners their need to accept Christ. As the tradition evolved, the emotional appeal characterized black preaching as its mode of persuasion. Preaching to an oppressed people, emotionalism served as a kind of escape/coping mechanism that allowed black people to vent constructively their pent-up frustrations and

²³ King, "Who Are We?" 10-11.

emotions due, by and large, to their oppression. Slave emotions, says Pipes, had to escape by means of religion or explode by means of slave insurrections.²⁴ Emotionalism was not solely a product of the slaves oppression. Its roots are also traceable to African forms of spiritual possession which found new expression in slave Christianity.²⁵ While emotionalism played a very significant part in the psychological and mental well-being of illiterate slaves, King finds pure emotionalism devoid of a logical argument and extremely repulsive to a literate pew. In his sermon entitled "Transformed Non-Conformist," he tells of a conversation that he had with a young preacher.

I was talking to a young man not long ago,.... after the sermon I was talking with him, and he was just jumping all over the pulpit and jumping out and spitting all over everything and screaming with his tune, and moaning and groaning, and I said, now I just can't understand you, young man, you're getting an education. I can understand that there were certain cultural patterns in the past that caused many of the older ministers to do this, but I don't understand why you feel you have to do this. And he said, "Well, you know, I got to get Aunt Jane," and he reduced the Gospel to showmanship, reduced the Gospel to playing in order to get Aunt Jane.²⁶

King here is not criticizing the emotionalism in getting Aunt Jane (for no one could get or appeal to Aunt Jane

24 Pipes, 67-69.

25 Raboteau, 65.

26 King, "Transformed Non-Conformist," 9.

like King could). Rather, he is criticizing the superficial understanding of the black preaching tradition by the young preacher. The young preacher sought to appropriate the unbroken form of emotionalism of the slave preacher without adapting it to his contemporary context. Not only is there continuity within the black preaching tradition, but change as well. The young preacher has only dealt superficially with the tradition by recognizing its continuity and not acknowledging its change. King's comments are suggestive of both continuity and change. King is saying that the black preacher's mode of persuasion must not only be emotional, but personal and logical as well. In his sermon entitled "New Wine In Old Bottles," he makes this point explicitly. In talking about the acceptability of integration (as an idea whose time has come), King said, that it is possible for an individual to accept something intellectually, but not emotionally. On the other hand, it is also possible to accept a thing emotionally and not accept it intellectually and spiritually. He goes on to say:

Now I've seen this [emotional acceptance] so often. And that's just as bad.... to have a new fresh determination emotionally, and not have it undergirded with a strong intellectual and spiritual determination. I used to see it so often, and I still see it today in the mass revivals. You see people sometimes coming by the tens and the twenties, they're rushing in to join the church. The preacher has preached a great whooping, loud, emotional sermon. And they run up. And pretty soon, you discover that these very people aren't around any more. They were really weeping that night. Tears were flowing down their

cheeks. And they were really emerging with a new determination, and a new desire. But a week or two later, you didn't see them any more. And you wondered what happened. The problem was that their new fresh desire for conversion was not undergirded with a new and fresh and strong spiritual and intellectual force.²⁷

The logistical aspects of King's argument are inherent within his sermonic disposition. Though often speaking without a manuscript, the organization of his thought is evident. He employs the classical homiletical logic of introduction, body and conclusion. This is most evident in his sermon entitled "A Christmas Sermon." Peace on earth, is the central theme of his message. He introduces this theme by suggesting that we do not have peace on earth and cites the inherent consequence.

We have neither peace within nor peace without.... Our world is sick with war: everywhere we turn we see its ominous possibilities. And yet, my friends, the Christmas hope for peace and goodwill toward all men can no longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopian. If we don't have goodwill toward men in this world, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own instruments and our own power.²⁸

King articulates the relevance of this theme by saying, "If we assume that life is worth living, if we assume that mankind has a right to survive, then we must find an alter

27 Martin Luther King, Jr., "New Wine In Old Bottles," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 2 January 1966, King Library and Archives, 8.

28 King, "A Christmas Sermon," 1.

native to war."²⁹ His transitional statement follows: "So let us this morning think anew on the meaning of that Christmas hope: "Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men."³⁰

Having introduced his theme, stated its relevance and made his transition from the introduction to the body of his argument, he now proceeds to explore his theme in the following sequence.

King's first point is: "... if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional."³¹ We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, he says, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together, says King, because of the interrelated structure of reality.

His second point is that "... we must embrace the non-violent affirmation that ends and means must cohere."

.... we will never have peace in the world [says King] until men everywhere recognize that ends are not cut off from means, because the means represent the ideal in the making, and the end in process, and ultimately you can't reach good ends through evil means, because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree.³²

King's third point is that "... we must be concerned

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

about the nonviolent affirmation of the sacredness of all human life." Every man, he says, is somebody because he is a child of God. Man is a child of God, made in His image, and therefore must be respected as such.³³

He concludes the sermon by saying: "If there is to be peace on earth and goodwill toward men, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations." This is our faith, he says, as we continue to hope for peace on earth and goodwill toward men: let us know that in the process we have cosmic companionship.³⁴

King's sermonic disposition is indeed well organized and follows the fundamental rules of homiletics. From the perspective of disposition, there is little if any distinguishable quality from King's preaching and white preaching. What has transpired, however, is a swing in the pendulum in black preaching disposition from emotions determining everything to logical, rhetorical organization.

Perhaps the one thing that distinguishes black preaching from other preaching is style. Black preaching style though varied as it is (says Mitchell), is characterized by freedom, musical tone or chant, rhythm, repetition, imagina-

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

tion and celebration.³⁵

For Mitchell, freedom denotes a kind of black cultural mannerism (such as the popping of suspenders, the unbuttoning of the collar or a conscious/unconscious exclamation such as "Bless My Bones!" by the preacher) that adds interest and signals authentic personhood.³⁶ But freedom in black preaching style has come to mean far more than this. The freedom characteristic of black preaching style is rooted in the fact that the black preacher predates the black church. As a result thereof this freedom manifest itself in distinct ways. It is evident in the preacher's use of the text. There is in black preaching an oppugnancy (a creative and imaginative element) emanating from the hardness of the black experience,³⁷ that manifests itself in a liberty with the text which often transcends its contextual bounds. It is also evident in the subject matter of black preaching. Because freedom is grounded in God, when we speak of God we inherently speak of freedom. It is therefore part of the task of black preaching to provide an existential experience of God's freedom (to preach until somebody gets happy). This is however, far more than the crea-

35 Mitchell, 162-177.

36 Mitchell, 168.

37. Charles H. Long, Significations (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 177-178.

tion of mere estatic emotionalism, it is an experience or a foretaste of glory divine. This is the aspect of freedom most vivid in King's preaching. In his sermon entitled "Desirability of Being Maladjusted," he said:

This is a great time to be alive. We stand today on the threshold of the most constructive period of our national history.... Now I am aware of the fact that there are those who will contend that we live in the most ghastly period of our nations history, and they would argue that the rhythmic beat of the deeper rumblings of discontent from the southland, the tragic reign of violence and terror, the presence of federal troops in Little Rock, Arkansas the stentorian outcry of interposition and nullification, the resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan and the birth of the Citizen's Council are all indicative of the deep and tragic midnight which encompasses our national life.... the present tensions represent the usual pains that accompany the birth of anything new.... The tensions which we witness in the south today can be explained in part by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of his nature and destiny and his determination to struggle and sacrifice until freedom becomes a reality.³⁸

For King, freedom for his people was the manifestation of the divine will. "Now I must assert [he said] the fact that the Negro be given freedom and justice because freedom and justice are ethical demands of the universe."³⁹

King did not employ musical tone or chant to any great degree in his sermonizing. However, he achieved a similar

38. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Desirability of Being Maladjusted," Sermon preached to Northern Jewish Congregation, Chicago, 12 January 1958, King Library and Archives, 1-2, 5.

39. King, "Maladjusted," 8.

affirmation of black personhood by the use of rhythm and repetition. King talks about how urbanization, education and employment caused the black man to take a new look at himself. He goes on to say:

....the Negro came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children, and that all men are made in his image, so he came to see that the important thing about a man is not his specificity but his fundamentum, not the color of his skin, not the texture of his hair but the texture and quality of his soul.⁴⁰

The repetition provides an impact and effect for King's proposition that human worth is grounded in the fact that we are human (made in God's image) and not in the fact that we are white or black. Repetition provides an emphasis on that which King is desirous for his audience to commit to memory. Following the repetition is the rhythmic affect of poetic meter as he says:

And so he [Negro] could now unconsciously cry out with the eloquent poet, "Fleecy locks and black complexion cannot forfeit nature's claim. Skin may differ, but affection dwells in black and white the same. Were I so tall as to reach the pole, or to grasp the ocean at a span, I must be measured by my soul. The mind is the standard of the man."⁴¹

King employs repetition and rhythm again to affirm black personhood in conveying the idea that God struggles with the oppressed.

40 Ibid., 4-5.

41 Ibid., 5.

Call it what you may, there is a creative force in the universe, that seeks to bring together the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole. There is a power that works at every moment to bring low prodigious hilltops of evil, and to bring down gigantic mountains of injustice. There is something in this universe that justifies Carlisle in saying, "Truth crushed to the ground will rise again." There is something in this universe that justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "No lie can live forever." There is something in this universe that justifies James Russell Lowell in saying, "Truth forever on the scaffold wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown stands God within the shadows, keeping watch above his own."⁴²

The next element of black preaching, that is also a part of King's preaching, is imagination. This element manifests itself in two distinct ways: imagery (biblical) and dramatization. Having talked about the three periods of racial progress in America (slavery, segregation, and constructive integration), King goes on to say:

....as a result of this decision from the Supreme Court [Brown vs Board of Education], we stand today on the threshold of the most constructive period in our nation's history. To put it in Biblical terms [,] we have broken aloose from the Egypt of slavery; we have moved through the wilderness of separate but equal and now we stand on the border of the promise land of integration. And I think we're going to get in. I know that there are giants in the land, giants of invested interest, giants of irrational emotionalism. But thank God there are those who have been in the land in the form of a Caleb and a Joshua and they have come back with a minority report, saying that we can possess the land.⁴³

⁴² Ibid., 16-17.

⁴³ Ibid., 6.

Having illustrated this point graphically through the use of biblical imagery, King now seeks to dramatize the urgency of the matter and the lateness of the hour.

The challenge facing America at this hour is to bring into full realization the ideals and principles of this third period, in the area of race relations. My friends we don't have long to do it. There's a bit of urgency about it. Now I know people are saying we need to slow up, we're pushing this thing too fast.... They're telling us to adopt a policy of moderation.... We can't afford to slow up. We have our self respect to maintain. But even more because of our love for America we can't afford to slow up, we love America too much.... The hour is late. The clock of destiny is ticking now. We must act now, before it is too late. The motor is cranked and we are moving up the highway of freedom toward the city of equality and we can't stop now because we have a date with destiny.⁴⁴

Finally, that characteristic which makes black preaching black is celebration. The black sermon contains within it a unity of progress that begins in the introduction and reaches a climax in the celebration. Celebration, as the Black climax, is not required says Mitchell to teach or to deal with concepts or to convey facts. Celebration as climax is fundamentally a positive reinforcement of the goodness of God and the standing of Black people in God's Kingdom,⁴⁵ while living in the midst of earthly oppression. King was a master celebrant because his sermon climaxes not only reinforced the goodness of God and the human position

44 King, "Maladjusted," 6-8.

45 Mitchell, 166.

in God's reign, but it was also relevant to his text. King prepares his listeners for the celebration by establishing the relevance of his theme ("Desirability of Being Maladjusted") with his subject matter.

In most academic disciplines, there are certain words that eventually become cliches and stereo types. They become a part of the technical nomenclature of that particular discipline.... Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word maladjusted.... Now we must all seek to live the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But I want to say to you that there are certain things within our social system to which I am proud to be maladjusted, and which I call upon you to be maladjusted.⁴⁶

He now proceeds into his climax by creating a tonal quality through the use of rhythm and repetition.

I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of mob rule. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. This evening I call upon you to be maladjusted to all of these things, for you see it may be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. I call upon you to be maladjusted. Yes as maladjusted as Amos, who in the midst of the tragic injustices of the day, to cry out in terms that echo across the generations, let judgment run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. As maladjusted as Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free. As maladjusted as Jefferson who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery cry out in terms lifted to cosmic proportions, all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights and among these are life,

⁴⁶ King, "Maladjusted," 17.

liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth in the midst of the fascinating and intricate military machinery of the Roman Empire, and to say to men, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you and I say to you this evening that the world is in desperate need of such maladjustment.⁴⁷

In preaching this sermon to the Northern Jewish Congregation in Chicago, Illinois, King sought to address the issues of moderation in the Civil Rights struggle and the silence of both moderate whites in the South and white liberals in the North. He sought to bring indigenous expression to these views by the employment of black preaching. In culminating this sermon, his climax was an exhortation to his listeners to meet the challenge of the hour by becoming actively involved in the struggle for Civil Rights as a manifestation of their faith in God.

Reinforcement of the goodness of God and the position of black people in the reign of God, in the celebration event, is seen in King's sermon entitled "Is The Universe Friendly?". In characterizing God's only begotten son, King said that the Gospel of John calls him "the logos." John he said, translates it, "the word."

In the beginning was the word and the word was God and the word was with God. And so the Jesus that we are thinking about this morning is the language of eternity translated into the words of time. He is the word. And maybe we do not need to get philosophical about it because we get lost in the atmosphere of philosophy and theology sometimes.

⁴⁷ King, 13.

Paul Tillich says, "He's the new being," and that's beautiful. But in our poetic language we've said it so many different ways. Sometimes when we've tried to see the meaning of Jesus we said, "He's a lily of the valley," and that he is "a bright and morning star." At times we've [said], "He's a rock in the weary land. He's a shelter in the time of storm." At times we've said, "He's altogether lovely." At times we've said, "He's a battle-ax in the time of battle." At times we've said that somehow he's a mother to the motherless and a father to the fatherless. At times we've just ended up saying, "He's my everything."⁴⁸

The final constituent of rhetoric is delivery.

Delivery in the black preaching tradition is dramatic for it provides an appeal to the imagination. It is rhythmical and emotional, reflecting the inculcation of singing and spirit possession of the African religious experience into the Christian religious experience. This element of black preaching also provides the constructive ventilation of pent up frustration largely emanating from the state of oppression. The delivery of the black preacher is also enthusiastic, sincere and personal. These elements are similar to those of the biblical prophets. Just as the word of God embraced the total being of the prophet, a similar phenomenon is present in the black preacher's delivery. These elements are vividly a part of King's preaching as evident in his preaching style.

Black Preaching As Prophetic Proclamation

 48 King, "Is The Universe Friendly?" 8-9.

The prophets, says von Rad, spoke in rhythm and parallelism. Their message was inseparable from its form. Such is the case with black preaching. Black preaching is an authentic expression of divine truth articulated through an indigenous utterance. To speak on behalf of the radically free God, and to appropriate that freedom as our own, necessitates a kind of imaginative and rhythmic quality that is created by encountering the hardness of the royal conscience. Rhythm and parallelism serve as a catharsis whereby the radical prophetic monotheist can gain an audience. It is an expression to oppressed people that their God is the God of their oppressors as well, and that God will indeed liberate them from their oppression. This perhaps accounts for the theme of freedom as subject matter for black preaching. When one is oppressed, that which matters most is freedom.

The prophet agonizes over the state of affairs because the impending judgment of God (to be experienced) is a one hundred percent judgment which the prophet must also experience. Prophetic criticism, therefore, emanates out of love; a love for self and subsequently a love for other selves. There can be no great agony apart from a great love. King's constant justification for his protest against America's injustices was love; a love for himself as an Afro-American and a love for his country, America. In his

sermon entitled "Paul's Galatians," he said:

There is a common misconception about the word "protest." Many persons regard protest as being against something. But protest means to testify for something. If I protest, I protest for love, as against hate.... Protest is not a negative thing; it is positive. And when there is no higher value that motivates protest, protest becomes empty, purposeless, and without significance.⁴⁹

Finally, black preaching as prophetic proclamation is evident in Bruggemann's idea of doxology. The celebration in black preaching is, in actuality, prophetic doxology. It is the transformation of fear into energy by a cathartic vehicle. In Bruggemann's case it is by song; in black preaching it is by the climatic event itself. It is a hope made manifest in despairing situations through tone, chant, rhythm, repetition or song. The purpose is to energize the hearers that they might return to the alternative conscious as mandated by their covenant emanating out of their torah. Doxology is therefore the transformation of despair into hope, via celebration.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Paul's Galatians," Sermon, n.p., n.d., King Library and Archives, 3.

CHAPTER 5

The Prophet as Theologian

Whenever the prophets spoke, they revealed something about God. Contemporary preachers as prophets are therefore confronted with the responsibility of revealing God in their preaching. Far too much of the preaching provided today is insignificant and irrelevant because of its use of the Bible to reinforce certain moralistic observations about human behavior, both personal and corporate.¹ Contemporary preaching is overbearing with church trivialities and narrow, moralistic specificities of sin (such as smoking, drinking, and sex). In his preaching, King did not forget nor ignore God, the very subject of preaching itself.

Theology of God

As a modern day prophet, King is also a theologian. His preaching reveals more of a concern for theology than with moral judgments, for the former reveals something about God. In his sermon entitled "Is the Universe Friendly?" he characterizes the nature of God.

....we read over in First John 4:8, "God is love." And he that dwelleth in God has discovered love, and he who loves, dwelleth in God. The universe is friendly because God is love.... God's love is unceasing and eternal. Love is not a single act of God. It is an abiding part of his nature. And it is quite interesting that whenever theologians

 1 Donald G. Miller, et al, P. T. Forsyth: The Man. The Preachers' Theologian, Prophet for the 20th Century (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1981), 38-39.

have gone back to try to find that one word that would ultimately explain the nature of God, they always ended up with the word "love." And God is love.²

Love is an inherent part of God's nature according to King, and consequently all that God does toward creation is done out of God's love for creation. That which is inscrutable to mortals works for their good because it is done out of God's love for humankind. Not only is God love says King, but God is also like a good shepherd. In his sermon entitled "Lost Sheep," he said:

....deep down within this parable [Lost Sheep] we see many things. First, this parable tells us something about God. I guess one of the most persistent questions facing mankind is not only the question, "Is there a God?", but is the question, "What is God like?" Men of every age have found themselves asking this question. We've had many definitions for God, but very seldom do we get down to those very simple definitions that can give God and our lives a kind of symbolic meaning that helps us to see what he is really like and so the question continues to go on, to present, sometimes felt, and sometimes feared, that power who rolls the planets on their course and draws the line of death across our human days. Who is he?.... what is he like? And in this parable, Jesus says to us that God is like a good shepherd. If you want to know who God is, just think of the traits of a good shepherd.... God seeks one lost sheep. See you never forget, my friends, that we never find God unless he's seeking to be found. God is a seeking God.³

God, says King, is constantly seeking to bring the dangling discords of life into a harmonious whole. God is actively

2 King, "Is The Universe Friendly?" 1-2.

3 King, "Lost Sheep," 1-6.

involved in the process of history, bringing about wholeness for all of creation. King's invincible hope was grounded in the fact that God struggles with those who struggle for freedom, justice, truth and beauty. For in the struggle, he said, let us know that there is cosmic companionship and an eternal contemporary (God).

The final character of King's God is found in his sermon entitled "We Would See Jesus." In it, he said:

....you can't have a true vision of Christ without looking up, because whenever you see Christ, you see the best in reality. Over the years men have asked the question what is God like? They've tried to define God in theological terms. They've tried to search through theological and philosophical documents, to get a good definition of God. But I tell you where you discover the answer to the question what is God like? And that is by turning to Christ. For you see the Bible talks not only of the God likeness of Christ, but it talks of the Christ likeness of God. And in this very Gospel where we gained our text, we read that Christ was the word made flesh. In other words Christ is the language of eternity transformed and translated into the words of time. And if you want to know what God is like, turn to Christ and get a good solid vision of him.⁴

Having said this, King summarizes the nature of God.

And so this morning I know that God is love, because Christ is love. I know that God is a good shepherd, because Christ told us a parable, a parable about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep in the fold and went out to search for one lost sheep. I know that God loves me, because Christ loves me. I know that God is just, because Jesus Christ is just. And I know that God is a merciful God, full of grace and glory. Because Jesus Christ is merciful. And so when we get a

4 Martin Luther King, Jr., "We Would See Jesus," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 7 May 1967, King Library and Archives, 2-3.

true vision of Christ, we get a vision of God because we are forced to look up."⁵

Theology of Humanity

For King, it is only in knowing who God is that human beings can really know themselves. God is the creator and humanity is the creature. King provides his doctrine of humanity in his sermon entitled "Who Are We."

One day the psalmist looked out. He noticed the infinite expense of the solar system. He gazed at the moon with all of its scintillating beauty.... And as he beheld this huge pattern.... this vast cosmic order, he raised the question.... that rings across the centuries, "What is man? That thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou rememberest him." And then he came out with an answer. "Thou hast made him.... a little less than God, and doth crown him with glory and honour."⁶

Having established a biblical basis as the point of departure for his theological position of humanity, he now proceeds to give contemporary meaning to the text.

This morning as we meditate on this question, "Who Are We?", I would like us to use this text as the basis for our thinking together. For it is precisely this realistic position.... which I see as the Christian position on the doctrine of man. Now let us first notice that the Christian view recognizes that man is a biological being with a physical body. In this sense, man is an animal.... Now this is what the psalmist means when he says: "Thou has made him a little less than God"....[God] is pure spirit, lifted above the categories of time and space. But man, that being made a little less than God, does have a body. He

5 King, "We Would See Jesus," 2-3.

6 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Who Are We?" 3.

is caught within time and space. And he can never disown his kinship with animated nature.⁷

King's view of creation is hierarchical: God, humanity and animate nature. He proceeds to distinguish those qualities that justify his hierarchical perspective.

There is something in man.... that cannot be reduced to materialistic and biological terms.... Man is a being of spirit.... he has a mind.... he climbs the stairs of his concepts.... Man is made just a little lower than God. And because he's a being of spirit, God crowned him with glory and honor. And ultimately this is what distinguishes man from his animal ancestry.... Man is a being of spirit.⁸

Having sought to justify his hierarchical view of creation, King now gives contemporary meaning to the biblical idea "image of God."

The highest expression of man's spiritual capacity, is his freedom.... Man is man.... because he's free.... What is freedom? Number one, freedom is the ability to deliberate. Who are we? We are beings [who] should have the ability to deliberate. Now to deliberate merely means the ability to.... really ask questions, to weigh alternatives.... This is deliberation. And then the second aspect of freedom is decision.... decision means to cut off. When you decide, you cut off alternatives.... And then the other aspect to freedom is responsibility. Responsibility is the ability to respond. It's answering for the decision that you've made. And so there is within freedom, in its every act.... deliberation, decision, and responsibility. And this is what makes man, this is the image of God in him. That he has the capacity to do all of this and that at bottom he is free.⁹

7 King, "Who Are We?" 3.

8 Ibid., 6-7.

9 Ibid., 7-8.

In King's theology of humanity, freedom is an inherent quality of creation itself. Therefore, it is only natural and normal for oppressed people to want their liberation. It is essentially, the human thing to do. God has humans free to deliberate and decide, even to misuse freedom. For King, this is precisely what has occurred.

....man.... has misused his freedom. I cannot leave you this morning without bringing this out. Man made in the image of God.... is made a free being. But man has ended up revolting against God. He has misused his freedom.¹⁰

Freedom according to King, not only gives mortals the ability to deliberate and decide but it also endows the ability to respond to deliberations and decisions. There is responsibility and consequence in human decisions. The consequence for the misuse of our freedom is sin. King goes on to say:

And so, if we want to know who we are, we must bring out the third point. Not only are we.... animals with physical bodies; not only are we beings of spirit, crowned with glory and honor; but we are also sinners.... in need of God's divine grace. I know this morning we hate to be told that.... If we are going to be honest about who we are, we will discover and we will know.... that we are sinners. The conflict is not between the id and the superego merely at bottom. It is a conflict between God and man. We are separated from ourselves. We are separated from our neighbors. We are separated from God.¹¹

10 Ibid., 8.

11 Ibid., 8-9.

Theology of Sin

According to King, it is original sin (the misuse of freedom) that has alienated us from ourselves, our neighbors and our God. In his sermon entitled "New Wine In Old Bottles," he explicitly espouses the idea of "original sin."

What is new, creative, strong requires something new and strong to hold it.... that's all I'm saying this morning. And I think this text ends with Nicodemus. He came to Jesus one night, and he raised the question, or probably many questions, and it's very interesting how Jesus answered the question.... How He dealt with Nicodemus. First He knew that Nicodemus symbolized something that pervades the life of every man. There is something called "original sin".... Whether we want to think of it as a sort of historical event, or whether we say it is a mythological category to explain the universality of sin. There is something called original sin. And Jesus knew that Nicodemus needed to change. But notice, Jesus didn't say to Nicodemus, "deal with a specific bad habit." You see Jesus realized that a bad habit makes a bad habit structure. So he didn't deal with one specific [habit]. If you will follow that text, you will see that He did something greater.... Jesus didn't say now, "Nicodemus, you stop doing this and that thing." He looked at his whole structure.... He looked at Nicodemus and said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again." Your whole structure must be changed.¹²

For King, it is not the narrow moralistic specificities of sin (bad habits) that have caused our alienation, rather it is our sin nature (original sin), or bad habit structure. King here, is theologizing as opposed to moralizing. Alienation, in King's thought, has a two-fold implication with both temporal and eternal meaning. Because of bad

12 King, "New Wine In Old Bottles," 8-9.

habit structures according to King, humans experience estrangement from self, neighbor and God daily. When the habit structures are changed (we are born again), reconciliation to self, neighbor and to God occurs. If however, bad habit structures are not changed, temporal estrangement becomes eternal. In his sermon entitled "Lazarus and Dives," he makes this point.

....the sin of Dives was that he didn't see Lazarus. In other words Dives sin was not that he was cruel to Lazarus but that he refused to bridge the gulf of misfortune that existed between them. Dives sin was not his wealth. His wealth was his opportunity. His sin was his refusal to use his wealth to bridge the gulf between the extremes of superfluous inordinant wealth and abject deading poverty. And this is the meaning of that dramatic scene that took place at that time. In other words my friends, Dives failed to bridge the gulf when he had an opportunity and now he finds himself in the situation where it is too late.¹³

King illustrates several significant points. The first is how bad habits emanate out of bad habit structures. Dives sin, according to King, was that he did not see Lazarus. Implicit in the analogy is the fact that Dives had the freedom to see or not see Lazarus. Not seeing Lazarus was only the expression of the misuse of Dives freedom to see him. The next point is that evil (the devil) is manifested in the opportunity to exercise one's freedom. There is the potential in every opportunity for good or

 13 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Lazarus and Dives," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 10 March 1963, King Library and Archives, 7.

evil. Evil is the manifestation of misused freedom. The ultimate responsibility for evil inherent in freedom, however, remains with the individual. King's other point is that life is filled with opportunities to change habit structures in order to use freedom properly, by seeing the Lazaruses at the gates.

Oh there is an opportunity standing before each of us this morning [he said]. There is something reminding each of us this morning that we ourselves have opportunities. Each of us is a potential Dives. Maybe not rich in material goods but rich in education, rich in social prestige, rich in influence, rich in charm. At our gate stands some poor Lazarus who has been deprived of all of these. There is a gulf. But the gulf can be bridged by a little love and a little compassion. A little concern and a little sympathy.¹⁴

He concludes the sermon by suggesting the eternal implications of alienation.

Bridge the gulf before it becomes too late. And as I have said to you so often there is such a thing in this universe as too late [hell]. There is such a thing in this world as the lost opportunity. There is something in this universe of failing to meet the demand of the moment and then having to face the fact that it is too late. And so you are challenged this morning. Something [the opportunity to change your habit structure] is standing before you with a great urgency this morning. Don't wait.... make that decision now, and at this moment, failing to realize this, we will be caught in the eternal situation of torment. This is the moment of challenge.¹⁵

Theology of Salvation

For King, alienation has both temporal and eternal im-

14 King, "Lazarus & Dives," 7-8.

15 Ibid., 8-9.

plications. How then, in King's thought, are humans saved from eternal alienation? How are bad habit structures changed? In his sermon entitled "Unfulfilled Dreams," he addresses this issue.

There is a tension at the heart of human nature [to use or misuse our freedom] and whenever we set out to dream our dreams and to build our temples we must be honest enough to recognize it. And this brings me to the basic point of the text. In the final analysis, God does not judge us by the separate incidents or the separate mistakes [bad habits] that we make [have], but the total bent of our lives [habit structures]. In the final analysis, God knows that his children are weak and they are frail. In the final analysis, what God requires is that your heart is right. Salvation isn't reaching the destination of absolute morality, but it's being in the process and on the right road.... The question is whether you are on the right road. Salvation is being on the right road. Not having reached a destination. Oh we have to finally face the point that there is none good but the Father. But if you are on the right road, God has the power and He has something called grace to put you where you ought to be.¹⁶

Changing habit structures requires a quality that mortals do not possess. It requires the grace of God. How then is this quality of God's grace experienced? For King, it is through discipleship to Jesus of Nazareth. In his sermon entitled "New Wine In Old Bottles," he said:

[Jesus] looked at Nicodemus and said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again. Your whole structure must be changed. Your whole life must be changed. This is the only way.... that you can prepare for the new wine of conversion. You must be born again. Your whole habit structure, your whole life, your whole being, must be changed." And

 16 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Unfulfilled Dreams," Sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 3 March 1968, King Library and Archives, 5.

this is the message for the morning. This is what Jesus is saying. And in the final analysis, he is saying, "I have great things in store for you, if you will only prepare to receive them. For God through Jesus Christ, is in the business of making for better bottles. He's in the business of making for better structures. And this morning, as we go into the New Year and we think about new ways, and we think about new habits, let us commit ourselves to Jesus Christ.... and let us give ourselves to Him.... and He will change our lives, and He will change our ways. And this is the meaning of grace.¹⁷

For King, Jesus of Nazareth was the concrete historical manifestation of God's grace. It was God's way of making reconciliation possible while remaining true to God's nature. In Jesus is both the judgment of God (crucifixion) for the voluntary estrangement of humankind, and the salvation of God (resurrection) for voluntary reconciliation. Estrangement and reconciliation are both voluntary in King's thought because of the inherent quality of freedom in creation. However, King as a radical monotheist is also aware of the interrelated structure of reality, the kindred of all peoples and the parenthood of God to all humankind. Consequently, to experience a change of habit structure through discipleship to Jesus is not to lay exclusive claim on God's grace. It does, however, offer the possibility of a proven way to give symbolic meaning to existence in the Western world.

 17 King, "New Wine," 9.

Theology of Church

By acknowledging God's acceptance through discipleship to Jesus, humankind becomes a part of the church: the body of baptized believers in Jesus Christ and all redeemed persons. Individuals become a part of the ministry of Jesus Christ. What then is the nature of this ministry? To this question, King addresses himself in his sermon entitled "Guidelines For A Constructive Church."

This morning I would like to submit to you that we who are followers of Jesus Christ and we who must keep his church [ministry] going and keep it alive also have certain basic guidelines to follow. Somewhere behind the dim midst of eternity God set forth His guidelines and through His prophets and above all through his son Jesus Christ He said that there are some things that my church must do. There are some guidelines that my church must follow.... The guidelines are clearly set forth for us. In some words uttered by our Lord and Master as He went [to] temple one day and he went back to Isaiah and suggested from him and he said the spirit of the Lord is upon me. Because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted. To preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind to set at liberty them that are bruised to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. These are the guidelines.... The church is dealing with man's ultimate concern. Therefore it has certain guidelines that it must follow.¹⁸

What ultimately concerns humanity, in King's estimation, was a change in habit structure. This change has both individual and corporate implications. Not only was he concerned with changing individual habit structures but social, cultural, economic and political structures as well. King

18 King, "Constructive Church," 2.

recognized that these systems were "carriers of sin" and that they had systemic consequences on the formation of individual habit structures. Poverty, brokenheartedness, and oppression were social conditions that damn the souls of the poor, the brokenhearted and the captives. In his sermon entitled "Judging Others," he further articulates this point.

Somehow [he said] we must come to see that people are as they are so often because things make them that way.... When you hit at sin, hit total sin.... we've got to see what this system has done to people. I've seen this evil system of segregation and discrimination destroy people. I've seen it make promising young men dope addicts. I've seen this system make promising young ladies prostitutes. I'm saying, my friend that we've got to see what this evil system has done and go out and fight it.¹⁹

The church was not only to be concerned with just the soul of humankind, but the body as well. It was to be concerned about the whole person. In his sermon entitled "Thou Fool," he said:

.... any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men, and is not concerned about the slums that cripple the souls, the economic conditions that stagnate the soul, and the city governments that may damn the soul is a dry dead do nothing religion, in need of new blood.²⁰

For King, it was as detrimental to have individuals with changed habit structures living in a society with institutionalized bad habits as it was to have bad habits existing in bad habit structures within individuals. A true

19 King, "Judging Others," 7.

20 King, "Thou Fool," 2.

revolution of societal values must take place. The church he said, must not only be the good Samaritan on life's road side, but it must also work for the transformation of the whole Jericho Road so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.²¹

The church is the medium of God's grace in the world. Humanity may therefore see in the ministry of Jesus, kept alive by the church, the grace of God that can change habit structures (both individual and corporate). It is extremely important that the church has some idea of its task. For if the task of the church is not carried out (as surmised in King's thought), no one will see the grace of God. The church, then, is to follow the example of Jesus (preach the gospel to the poor, etc.) that God's grace might be revealed.

King's Theology as Black Theology

King's theological formation of faith was also indigenous to his black cultural experience. It was a theology of liberation of which black liberation was an inherent part. In his sermon entitled "Who Is My Neighbor," he said: "I'm concerned about people, not just black men, not just white men, not just brown men, but all men."²² His par-

 21 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam," Sermon Sermon preached at Riverside Church, New York, 4 April 1967, King Library and Archives, 14.

22 King, "Who Is My Neighbor?" 5.

icipation in the struggle for freedom and dignity of human personality was on behalf of all peoples. Because his God was interested in the liberation of the whole human race, so was he.

King however, was not necessarily concerned with the theological question (as suggested by Paul Garber) of how to obtain liberation from his oppressors without permanently alienating them. King's question was how to obtain liberation from his oppressors through Christian means. If the beloved community was King's end for which he labored, a community where everybody would love and respect the freedom and dignity of human personality, then the means which are ends in the process must reflect the ends sought. In his sermon entitled "A Christmas Sermon" King makes this point.

Now let me say, secondly, that if we are to have peace in the world, men and nations must embrace the nonviolent affirmation that ends and means must cohere.... we will never have peace in the world until men everywhere recognize that ends are not cut off from means, because the means represent the ideal in the making, and the end in process, and ultimately you can't reach good ends through evil means, because the means represent the seed and the end represents the tree.²³

This is what non-violence did for King. It provided a justifiable means to his end. It gave him a way to fight for his liberation with all that he could muster, while simultaneously conveying creative redemptive good will to his oppressors/neighbors. In his sermon entitled "The Birth

23 King, "Christmas Sermon," 2.

of a New Nation" he makes this point explicitly.

The aftermath of non-violence is the creation of the beloved community, the aftermath of non-violence is redemption, the aftermath of non-violence is reconciliation; the aftermath of violence are every bitterness.... Oh, my friends, our aim must be not to defeat Mr. Englehardt [his oppressor].... Our aim must be to defeat the evil that's in [him],.... our aim must be to win the friendship of.... Mr. Englehardt. We must come to the point of seeing that our aim is [to create the beloved community] to live with all men as brothers and sisters under God and not be their enemies or anything that goes with that type of relationship.²⁴

King's prophetic radical monotheism requires of him a love for his oppressors who are, in a universal sense, his neighbors. How is this love expressed in non-violence?

King addresses this question in his sermon entitled "Love Your Enemies."

There is another thing that you must do to love your enemy. When the opportunity will present itself for you to defeat your enemy, and this opportunity will present itself sooner or later, you must not do it. For love in the final analysis means understanding creative good will to all men; it simply means that you will do nothing to defeat anybody. You work to defeat evil systems, but not individuals who are caught up in those evil systems. This is the meaning of love, and I believe this is what Jesus means when he says, "Love your enemies;" that you only seek to uplift him.... I am convinced that if oppressed people are to break loose from their oppression honorably, they must use the weapon of love and non-violence.... [and] in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory. We will win our freedom and at the same time win

 24 Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Birth of A New Nation," Sermon preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, April, 1957, King Library and Archives, 15.

the hearts of those who have deprived us of our freedom.²⁵

King's theology is indigenous also because it affirmed black humanity. In his sermon entitled "Is The Universe Friendly?" he said:

[the] old slave preacher would look at his people, he would say to 'em now, "all week long you've been told that you are nobody, all week long you've been reminded of the fact that you're a slave, all week long you've been called a nigger. But I want to say to you [,] you ain't no slave, you ain't no nigger, but you God's children." And it was that affirmation that gave them hope. It was that affirmation that gave them something on the inside to stand up amid the difficulties of their days. And this is what I say this morning. Abused and scorned though we may be, God loves us. And if we can but see this, no oppressor can overwhelm us, no temporary setback can defeat us. For we know there is a God who loves all of his children. He loves his black children as well as his white children and every man from a bass black to a treble white is significant on his eternal keyboard.²⁶

Lastly, King's theology is indigenous because it asserts the dignity and worth of human personality. In his sermon entitled "Lost Sheep," he said:

And this parable [Lost Sheep] comes to tell us something so beautiful. The story asserts the value of one lost life, the value of one lost life. In other words, this parable tells us about the dignity and worth of all human personality. God is concerned about all of his children and he has stamped on all of his children a seal of preciousness. One lost child is significant to him. Every individual is worthful. So if you are worried about your somebodiness, don't worry any longer because God fixed it a long time ago. He said, "I'm making all of my children in my image,

25 King, "Love Your Enemies," 34-39.

26 King, "Is the Universe Friendly?" 6.

and I will declare that every child of mine has dignity and every child of mine has worth."²⁷

King: A Model For Contemporary
Prophetic Ministry

To suggest King as a model for contemporary prophetic ministry has multiple implication for the church. Initially, it is to set forth a proper understanding of biblical prophesy. It is to see biblical prophesy as a vocation of agony resulting from the proclamation of both the judgment and hope of God.

Next, it is to see King aright by asserting the biblical prophetic tradition as his model for ministry. This is the universal quality that is often missing in King scholarship. King understood himself as a prophet, as evident by his preaching and sought to live out this understanding of his role and message within his socio-religious context. It is the biblical prophetic tradition that defines the minister's role and message.

Further, suggesting King as a model for prophetic ministry is to establish radical prophetic monotheism as the rubic under which right action is to be determined. The Christian virtue of love must therefore be viewed from a universal perspective, less conduct becomes provincially defined. Because ultimate loyalty is to the One God beyond the many, all humanity is received as neighbors and there-

27 King, "Lost Sheep," 6.

fore must be treated neighborly (loved).

Still further, King as a model for contemporary prophetic ministry suggests that the divine word by which we have been apprehended must receive indigenous expression. It is not to suggest that all preachers can be prophetic by imitating the black preaching style. Rather, it is the challenge to find indigenous expression of the divine word through individual personalities.

Finally, King as a model for prophetic ministry implies that contemporary preaching must reveal something about God. In sermonizing, the challenge is to theologize and not moralize.

Appendix A

The Appropriate Response to Grace

(Isa. 40:1-5)

Kelvin Tipton Calloway

The words of our text are believed to have been written sometime after 550 B.C. The prophet for whom the book is named is no longer active, having prophesied some two hundred years earlier (between 734-701 B.C.). But now a member of this prophetic school has taken up the task as he provides us with a word from the Lord. The Babylonian Empire, having been at the pinnacle of its power under King Nebuchadnezzar until about 562 B.C., is now declining. The Israelites however are still in exile; some having been deported in 597, others in 587 and still others in 582 B.C. But even in exile, the national traditions of worship had not been completely broken. Neither Ezekiel (the other prophet of the exile) nor this prophet suggest, even in the slightest way, that the Israelites were forced to worship the gods of Babylon. However, what is crucial here for our understanding is the tribal concept of God in antiquity. Each tribe or nation worshipped a particular god. The Israelites worshipped Yahweh and the Babylonians worshipped Marduk. The power of the god was determined by the military power of the tribe or nation. If your army defeated my army in battle, then your god must be stronger than my god. If

your god was more powerful than my god, then it only made good sense for me to worship your god. If I did not worship your god, then it becomes incumbent upon me (for a sense of psychological saneness) to seek some justifiable reason not to do so. The mere fact that Israel was now in exile suggests that Marduk was more powerful than Yahweh; yet some of the Israelites continued to worship the God of their parents.

Have you ever found yourself in exile --in a situation where you thought your God was all-powerful and that God would protect you, and yet it seems as though you were unprotected? You thought that God would protect your children and you prayed for your children, but you found them getting into trouble -- getting into drugs and getting into gangs and getting involved in illicit sex even in spite of your prayers. You thought that God would protect your home and your marriage and you prayed. But in spite of your prayers, your home life was miserable and your marriage has broken up. Has this ever happened to you? You thought that God would protect you from sickness and you prayed, "Lord by your stripes I'm healed." But in spite of your prayers, in spite of your petitions and in spite of your pleas, you found yourself flat on your back. Has this ever happened to you? Why continue to worship a god like this? Why continue to give patronage, homage and devotion to such a god as this? If we continue to do so, then what sense are we to

make out of our exiles?

The text confronts us with such faith-shaking inquiries as these, that we might understand more fully the character of our radically free God. Let us therefore examine closely these words of the prophet.

This prophet is a prophet of salvation. Now salvation is not a New Testament phenomenon. God's salvific work did not begin with Jesus at Calvary, rather it began with Noah and the ark as God saved all of those aboard the ark. God's saving work is seen once again in Israel's history as God orchestrated their exodus out of Egypt. The prophet presupposes the saving work of God in their history. God has done it before, and God will now do it again. It was God who brought us out of Egypt, and it is God who will now bring us out of exile. That's good news. To know that God has done it before is sufficient enough to believe that God will do it again. My present confidence in God is inspired by my past experience with God. To know that God has acted before in history on our behalf is enough to believe that God will act again in history on our behalf. To know that slavery has been abolished and segregation struck down is sufficient enough to believe that God will bring about total liberation of the whole human race. I believe that James Russell Lowell was right:

Truth forever on the scaffold
Wrong forever on the throne
Yet the scaffold sways the future,
and behind the dim unknown

Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above his own.

But there is something further here that we must see about salvation, and that is it only comes after judgment. Divine judgment is divine salvation. The fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent deportations to Babylon meant that the judgment predicted by the eighth and seventh century prophets had been fulfilled. From a prophetic faith, this was not the fulfillment of a foretold doom; rather it was divine salvation brought forth by divine judgment. In other words, the prophet seems to suggest that there can be no rainbow without forty days and nights of rain. There can be no dividing of the Red Sea apart from the making of bricks without straw. And there can be no resurrection without the crucifixion. There can be no salvation without judgment. It is what the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls costly grace. Our exiles, therefore, may be viewed as the cost of God's grace. They are the divine judgment out of which divine salvation comes.

Now, we respond to this grace in one of two ways. The first and yet the most detrimental of these is guilt. Our response to God's grace is a feeling of condemnation, emanating from a sense of inadequacy. We've done wrong and have asked the Lord for forgiveness and God has forgiven us; but we don't act like we've been forgiven. We go around mopeing and groping, moaning and groaning over our past sins

as if God hasn't forgiven us. We feel inadequate because we have fallen short of the glory of God.

Such a feeling has its roots in a hypocritical ethic of living above sin which the church has not had the courage to correct. Brothers and sisters, we must come to grips with the reality of sin after salvation. We are not perfect, we're just forgiven. The effects of this guilt are far too damaging to the wholeness of the body of Christ. Our ethicists and theologians must seek to establish contemporary boundaries defining our identity. We must struggle for a twentieth century meaning of being in the world, but not of the world. We must seek to overcome this feeling of guilt by an appropriate understanding of our relationship with God.

The second and most appropriate response to God's grace is that of repentance. The prophet does not dwell on the many times Israel has forsaken God. He does not dwell on the many sins that they have committed against God. He does not dwell on their many shortcomings; they are all implied. He seems to suggest to Israel that in spite of your failures to serve the divine will, God still loves and forgives you. And because God loves us and because God forgives us, it's only appropriate for us to repent. Judgment does not call for guilt, but for repentance. The Hebrew word Shub means to turn around. It means to change direction. It is a future orientation as opposed to a past orientation. It em-

powers us for new responses to the creative love of God.

"But preacher, won't I still fall down on the way?"

Yes. "Won't I still fall short of God's glory?" Yes.

"Won't I still miss the mark sometime?" Yes. But even though we fall down and even though we fall short and even though we miss the mark, let us do as Martin Luther suggests and that is to "sin boldly" -- not as an acknowledgment of our disobedient life, but as acknowledgment that we ever stand in the need of God's grace. That grace that seeks and saves us. That grace that justifies and sanctifies us. That grace that cleanses and purifies us. That grace that washes us whiter than snow. So let us sin boldly by being troubled about our faithlessness. Sin boldly by confessing our shortcomings and not running away from them. Sin boldly by facing and renouncing our sins. Sin boldly by trying to be better, every day of our lives.

We may not reach perfection, but we've tried. Sometimes right and sometimes wrong, but we've tried. Sometimes buked and sometimes scorned, but we've tried. Sometimes mistreated just as sure as we're born, but we've tried. And that's the challenge of the hour: to try and be better. For, if we make one step, Jesus will make two. And in the final analysis, it just may be, that God will take our service, our feeble efforts to try, and count them as righteousness. Amen.

Appendix B
Oughtness and Isness
(Rom. 7:14-25)
Kelvin Tipton Calloway

Oftentimes what we ought to do and what we do are two different things. I ought to make up my bed. I ought to take out the garbage. I ought to clean the bathroom. I ought to wash the dishes. I ought to show, in some tangible way, love for my spouse, my children or those to whom I am in relationship. I ought to do justice. I ought to love mercy. I ought to walk humbly with God. I ought to go to church out of a sense of gratitude for all that God has done. I ought to follow unwaveringly the ethical precepts of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But oftentimes what we ought to do and what we do are two different things.

It was Socrates, one of the greatest minds to ponder philosophical inquiry, who said in essence, that if we knew the good, we would do the good. And because we did not do the good, then we really did not know the good. What Paul presents us with in this text transcends Socratic thought. For Paul says that I know the good and yet, I do not do it. I know what I ought to do and yet, I do not do it. I see the good with my mind but sometime I cannot translate it into action. There is something that impedes the natural

progression from thought to action. This is Paul's present condition in Christ as suggested by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin C. E. B. Cranfield and Emil Brunner. It is as T. Larry Kirkland, pastor of Brookins Community Church, Los Angeles rightly suggests, a portrait of a struggling Christian. For there is a civil war going on in our lives. And everytime we set out to be good, there is something pulling at us, telling us to be evil. Everytime we set out to love, something is pulling at us, trying to make us hate. Everytime we set out to be kind and say nice things about people, something is pulling at us, to be jealous and envious. There is a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in each of us. So much so that we must say with Plato that human personality is like a charioteer with two headstrong horses, each wanting to go in different directions. There is, says Goethe, enough stuff in us to make both a "gentleman and a rogue." The question for Paul and subsequently for us, is to what is this misery attributed?

Paul attributes this wretched condition to the flesh. The flesh in Paul's thought does not have the same connotation as body. It is an expression of our creatureliness and our humanness. It is human existence, though turned away from God. It is our attempt to be independent of God. To put it in theological language, it is to be for ourselves. The flesh is something to which we are bound, even in Christ. It is that part of us, according to Brunner, which

materially links the new being in Christ to the old being in Adam. We are never truly rid of sin as long as we are creaturely, as long as we are human, as long as we are in the flesh; we are never truly rid of sin. Perhaps this is why the Apostle tells the Corinthians Christians that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. But when the trumpet shall sound, this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality (1. Cor. 15:50-53), and then we won't have to struggle any more.

With words that have caused uneasiness in the minds of biblical scholars and theologians alike, Paul has captured the seriousness of the ethical demands of God. How then can we profit from his profound insight?

Initially, we can profit from Paul's insight by seeing our situation aright. We are human. But what does that really mean? It means that we are flesh and blood, that we are creaturely. It means that we do not do the good that we know to do. This is a characteristic that distinguishes us from God, that distinguishes the creature from the creator. God can do the good that God knows to do. Why? Because God is pure spirit and there is in God no flesh, consequently no sin. The flesh therefore can be viewed as an eternal reminder that we are the created and not the creator. If we are to be helped from our condition, we must first see it aright.

It is the struggle (to do good over against doing evil) that lets us know that we are Christians. The highest good according to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant is a good will. It is not the action but the motive behind the action. A good will is one that wills what it wills out of regard to duty as opposed to sentiment. If we are doing right just to go to heaven, we're doing right for the wrong reason. If we are doing right just to avoid going to hell, we're doing right for the wrong reason, for we are doing right out of sentiment. Ultimately we must do right because it is right to do right. We must do right as our duty to God. This is the seriousness of the ethical demands of our God. Then when we commit wrong actions, we do so as mistakes and as exceptions, yet simultaneously affirming the universal moral law. This is what Paul is saying in the text today and we can profit from his insight by seeing our situation aright.

Secondly, we can profit from Paul's insight by using our freedom responsibly. We must use our freedom as an opportunity to do the divine will--glorifying God and not as a license to sin. Inherent in every act of freedom is an opportunity for both good and evil. Paul says, when I would want to do good, evil is always present. It is when we choose to do good over against doing evil, that God is glorified. Not coerced, not compelled, nor constrained, but when we voluntarily choose to do good, God is pleased.

Usually, I have to tell my six-year old daughter the good. "Psachal, go make up your bed. Go clean up your room. Do your homework. Put your plate in the sink. Say your prayers." But every now and then she comes to me and says Daddy, I've made my bed. "Daddy, I've cleaned my room. I've done my homework. I've put my plate in the sink. I've said my prayers." And it makes me proud; it makes me glad just to see that she has done the good she knows to do. And oftentimes I respond, "That's my girl." That's the way it is with God, when we have voluntarily done the good that we know to do, God is pleased, God is glorified and God is proud and it seems as if there is a voice ringing across the aeon of the ages saying "That's my girl; that's my boy" or "That's my child." God is pleased when we use our freedom responsibly.

Finally, we can profit from Paul's insight by knowing that God accepts us just as we are. This is the divine affirmation of our person; that God accepts us as we are. Struggling and often falling short, God accepts us just as we are. Whatever it is in life that has sought to threaten your personhood, you need to know today that God accepts us just as we are. Maybe you didn't achieve your dream. We have big dreams. Dreams to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc... and you didn't quite make it. We are all victims of shattered and unfulfilled dreams. But lift up your head today because God accepts us just as we are. Maybe you

didn't measure up to the expectations of your parents or your spouse or your employer or your peers and it has left you with a less than complex. God accepts us just as we are. Maybe you grew up on the wrong side of the track and it has given you an inferiority complex. God accepts us just as we are. Maybe you got into some trouble (with the police) along the way and it has left you marred with a not good enough complex. You're not a bad person; you just found yourself doing the evil that you did not want to do. God accepts us just as we are. "Oh wretched man that I am, who would but deliver me from this body of death?" Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, that God accepts us just as we are.

Just as I am without one plea
But that thy blood was shed for me
And that thou bidst me, come to thee
O Lamb of God, I come.

Will you come today and accept your acceptance by God
through faith in Jesus Christ? So be it.

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